

GUEST OF REALITY

PÄR LAGERKVIST

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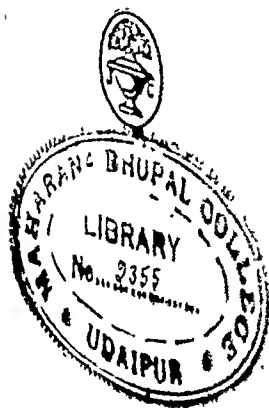
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TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH BY

ERIK MESTERTON

AND

DENYS W. HARDING



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

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common influence of Strindberg's expressionist plays. The final statement of this phase, with its savage isolation and metaphysical despair, was *Chaos*, published in 1919. But *Chaos* also indicates his growth towards a mood of acceptance that finds more assured expression in *The Eternal Smile*, which came out in 1920.

Guest of Reality (1925), his next work apart from a volume of short stories (some of which have appeared in translation in *Modern Swedish Short Stories*), was the first of several books in which the material of everyday life is treated more directly. Finally with *The Hangman* (1933) we reach a phase of Lagerkvist's writing that is still in course of development. An individual contemporary unattached to any school of literature, Pär Lagerkvist can only be watched at work without attempts at prophecy.

THE ETERNAL SMILE

THE ETERNAL SMILE

THERE were once upon a time a few of the dead, they were sitting together somewhere in the darkness, they didn't know where, perhaps nowhere, they were sitting and talking to pass eternity away.

No, said one of them, continuing a conversation that had been going on for ages on end, the living are too self-complacent. They busy themselves with their odds and ends and imagine they're alive. When they come out of their houses in the morning and hurry off in the sharp air, pleased with a new day, they shoot secret glances at each other as much as to say: you and I, we live. And they hurry off to their works, good and bad, heap them on top of each other, one above the other, till the whole thing topples over and they can begin again. They're conceited, contented little insects, nothing more. They build up and pull down, build up and pull down, and sweat with zeal and wink secretively at one another: we live, we live, we live. They build and build, and they point to everything they've got half finished or near enough: we've got all this done, every bit of it. They're conceited little insects, nothing more.

He sat staring in front of him, fretting. He was lean, embittered, tormented.

Up to the present, life has a few million millions dead, he went on. It is we who live. We exist in those below. We exist quietly. We go about in stockinged feet, no one hears us. It is not we who make the fuss, we are unobtrusive and silent. It is not we who mind steam engines, who start trains, who ring up on the 'phone. But it is we who live. It is not we who build up and pull down, build up and pull down. It is not we who feel that this is morning, that this is evening. But it is we who live.

And he sighed heavily.

It is we who think of everything, who arrange everything, it is we who cannot forget anything. It is we who long for everything, day after day, year after year, for thousands and thousands of years.

Whenever there is a little quiet, it is us. When anyone weeps, it is us. Whenever anything really happens, it is us.

The living is simply what is dead.

He stopped short and spat in front of him. Wiping his mouth, he mumbled something to himself which no one could hear.

I wonder whether you are right, after all, rejoined another mildly and reflectively. God knows whether we are so important.

I wonder whether, if one looks deeper, the living too haven't some significance. They make use

of us, they exploit us unscrupulously, and with it all they brag so much about themselves. But they do really contribute something of their own. And such as it is it has great value at the moment, even though later on it has hardly any. I can't agree that they haven't a certain importance of their own. I even venture so far as to maintain that it is they who live and we who are dead.

They sat silent a long while, each turning it over in his own mind.

At last the lean one began again, resting his head in his dry hand and staring out into what looked like darkness.

It is long since I was alive, but I remember that I lived by the sea. I believe that I was born there and stayed there all the time. But possibly I only came there once by chance and left again. I no longer remember, and anyhow it makes no difference. In any case, I remember that I lived by the sea.

I remember the small rattling pebbles at the water's edge. But the gale above all, drowning the other noises, the roaring gale, with all the great clouds over the water. And I remember the quietness, the unmoving quietness, the complete silence around me.

The sea, that is the only great thing down there. Down there it is eternity. I lived by the sea. I had a house close to the shore with a view over the unfathomable depths. In one of the windows stood

a little dried pot-plant which I always forgot to water. I don't know why I remember it, it played no part in my life. I lived by the sea. Yet I remember it very well. I remember that it was still there when I was going to die, and how I thought to myself: if it were not that I was going to die I ought to get up and give it a little water. I recall too that as I lay and looked at it I thought it strange that it should outlive me. Poor thing. However, it played no part in my life. I lived by the sea.

I was a man of great importance. As far as I know there was no one in my time like me and no one so important. At least I never noticed it. I didn't meet other people very much either. I lived alone by myself. I listened to the gale and to the quietness, I was already in my lifetime a living, struggling man. I felt within myself everything that really is. I was greater and more than anybody else. In point of fact, so far as I know, there was no one besides myself.

I was simply made to die. That is not true of everyone, of course. But I had the proper dignity and weight. Living really consisted in me. I could die secure. I needed only to die.

He left off. A deep sigh forced itself from his lips.

Then he went on, seriously as before.

I think that in order to be dead, that is in order to belong to eternity, one requires to be something

really important. One requires to have been outside and above life in the ordinary sense, not to have been included in it. And I was, as I have already said, a very important man.

The second now joined in.

Without going into what has just been said, I should like to mention that I too was a very important person, though it is with the greatest reluctance that I say it of myself. I was, if not in my own yet in everyone else's eyes, the most remarkable person who had existed on the earth up to that time. I lived a rich, glorious life, I carried out feat after feat, one great work after another, which mankind will never be able to forget. I myself, however, have forgotten what it was all about. And even if I could recall all that it would only weary me here. I don't feel in the least remarkable now. I feel very ordinary, strangely insignificant.

I was simply made to live. To my mind anyone is fit for sitting here and being dead. But for living, really living, and taking pleasure in it, only the great, the prodigious man is fit for that. I was such a man. In my own and many others' view it was not intended that I should ever die. And in fact it came about through a trivial accident.

He sighed, he too, and sat mute for a long time, sunk in his thoughts. Then he added:

As I have already mentioned, I was a very exceptional man. However, I am not remarkable now.

I think life is something incomprehensibly great and rich. I think death is nothing. Despising my own emptiness, I love everything living.

Nevertheless I would maintain that very few people have really lived. Although I am reluctant to speak about myself, I should like to mention that, so far as I know, I alone have lived.

However, I am dead now.

He left off. It seemed as if the conversation was at an end.

But it was continued by a third person. He was a fat, thick-set man with little eyes, and his hands clasped across his expansive paunch. He looked like a grocer, trustworthy, but a little undistinguished perhaps. His short legs hung dangling in what looked like darkness. You could see that if he had been sitting on a chair his feet would not have reached the floor. He said:

Although I haven't understood anything of what you gentlemen have been saying, I feel all the same how completely I agree with you about everything.

How good it was to be alive. How great life was, and how lovely. When I stood behind my counter with all my goods round me, with the smell of cheese and coffee, of soft soap and margarine, how good life was.

My shop was the biggest in the town. As far as I know there was no other so important as mine. It was in the best street, everybody came to me. I

had choicer goods than any other. Yes, so far as I know there was no other.

I am not saying it to appear important, I was quite an ordinary person after all. I was Mr. Pettersson, the grocer, nothing more. I was like everybody else. I was Mr. Pettersson, the grocer. But I thank God that I have lived.

It was hard when I had to die. I turned to the wall and said to myself: this is the end, Pettersson. I couldn't believe that it wasn't the end of everything. There had been no time for me to think about higher matters, I had had enough to do with my own. I was no remarkable person either. I was Mr. Pettersson, the grocer, I was like everybody else. And when I lay and thought back over my life, when I thought how year in and year out I had stood and weighed out groceries and wrapped up salt herring, then I thought it was too strange if on that account I should exist through all eternity. I said to myself: damned if I know whether there's any life after death, I don't think there is. Then I died.

And yet there was after all! Here I sit after all. And it's as though nothing had happened, it's as though I still stood and weighed out groceries and wrapped up herring. I am still Mr. Pettersson, the grocer.

He left off, moved. Then he added:

Although I don't understand anything, I am thankful for everything. I have lived. I am dead. All the same I live. I am thankful for it all.

He stopped and sat there sunk in deep thought.
It grew quiet.

The conversation passed on upwards in the darkness to other groups of people, further and further removed, it went on in a loop, which rose higher and higher. Then it twisted downwards again. After nearly a hundred years it once more reached the group where it had started. It came in now from the opposite side. But this time it didn't give rise to so many words.

The embittered one said:

As I mentioned before, I was a very important man. I believe, too, that in order to be dead, that is, in order to belong to eternity, it is necessary to be something really important. It is necessary to have been outside and above life in the ordinary sense, not to have been included in it. I was such a man.

The second one spoke next:

I think that life is everything. I think that life is something incomprehensibly great and rich which can only be grasped by the great man, the prodigious man. I was such a man. However, I am dead now.

Then the grocer, who sat a little out of the way and apart from them, added:

I am still Mr. Pettersson, the grocer.

But while they just sat thinking about this, other conversations were going on among the people round about them; everyone was describing his life, absorbed in it. One said:

I am thinking about myself and my life.

My workshop, where I worked from morning till night, lay on the outskirts of a big town. I was a locksmith, I did nothing else, what I am going to tell you is about that. The little smithy, where I was always by myself, for I wouldn't have any help or anyone about, lay hidden away in an orchard where there were many trees and a lot of fruit and flowers, which someone whom I didn't know had planted some time long ago. But everything was unkempt and run wild; I had my own job, I did nothing else. I stood in the half-dark smithy from morning till late on into the night and made my locks for all the houses that people lived in, away there in the town. I didn't make them in the ordinary way, I made every one different. I made them so that each one was different from every other that there was, and could only be opened by somebody who had the one key and knew the way to turn it in the lock; for I made them so that the key had first to be turned in one direction, then pushed further in and turned in the other; or I would devise other secret methods, I thought out hidden subtleties which only one person could master, I hated people, I shut them in each by himself. My locks became famous, they were sold in a shop, I don't know where it was, I didn't know the town, I never left my house, I worked at my own job. Every one wanted my locks for their houses, so that no one should be able to break in; I

worked day and night, I stood bent over my work year in and year out, alone, I worked at my own job, I made locks, the money piled up, they were expensive locks, people bought them all the same, I was rich, I didn't know what I owned, I was poor. I grew old and grey, my fingers began to shake at their work; I was alone, no one saw it; I went back over things in my mind, I went on working with my shaking hands. I am telling you about my life.

Then it happened onemorningwhen I raised my head and looked out of the dusty workshop window that through a gap in the orchard I saw a young girl go past on the road. She was seventeen perhaps, perhaps eighteen, she was walking bare-headed, she had fair hair that shone in the sun, she was happy and looked about her as she walked. It was only for a minute that I had a sight of her, then she was gone, hidden by the trees.

I stood gripped by something. I dropped my work and stared out, she was no longer there. The picture remained, her fair hair, her happy face, which was so young and firm. I thought I knew her. I had never seen her before, I never saw people. I felt as if she had been my child, I don't know why. I had never lived with any woman. I, miserable old man, bent and shaking, I felt as if she were my child. Her hair was so fair that the sun when it came and caressed it seemed to linger there. I didn't know who she was. I only knew I loved her. I stood staring out, she was no longer there.

Slowly I turned back again to my work. My hands shook more than before. No one saw it, only I. I found it hard to hold the parts; I tightened my hold of them, I turned back again; I drew my rough hand across my mouth, I got ready to go on with my own job. I said to myself, there is nothing to love, nothing is worth our love, nothing. I turned back again, blotted it out, I worked at my own job. But my eyes had grown so dim; I went and wiped the dust from the window, so that I could see to work; I waited for her to go the same way back again.

The whole day went by. I worked hard, I got more done that day than usual. Not before evening when the light began to fail did she come back.

I saw her again. She went along smiling, what was left of the sun shone in her hair alone. I stood mute at the window and gazed.

When she had vanished I crept out. I went through the orchard, it was in the summer, there was a smell of flowers; but everything had grown wild. I came out on to the road, it was all strange, I crept after her. I came into the town, I followed her at a distance, the streets opened out one after the other, I saw nothing but her. She went into a house. I stood outside, but a long way off. The children began to laugh at me, I had my apron on. Slowly I went back to my own place.

Now I thought no more about her. I went on working, as before. In a little while I grew very

old, it was while summer came to an end and autumn set in. The leaves began to fall in the orchard. Then one night it happened that while I stood as usual bent over my work it seemed to go empty and cold round my heart, I was so cold that I shivered, my whole body was like ice. I dropped what I was working on, I was shaking. My legs wouldn't carry me, I felt as if I couldn't live much longer. Such an anguish came upon me, I looked round me wildly in the half-dark room where only a lantern spread its flickering light, it was windy and raining outside, the overgrown trees beat against the panes with their bare branches, I didn't want to die, not alone, not here where everything was my own. I staggered out into the passage, I pushed open the door, went out. The wind tried to knock me down, the rain beat against my face. I gathered all the strength I had left, I staggered out on to the road, into the town.

There was no one in the bleak wind-swept streets, only me. I groped my way in the rain and darkness. I went groping my way to her house, I wanted to die near her, near my child. I couldn't find it, I went wrong. At last I got there. I knocked on the door, no one answered. I knocked, no one answered. I groped over the lock with my old fingers. I wanted to die near my child, near her whom I loved. No one came.

I rushed back home. I set the bellows going, melted and moulded; I filed out keys, as many as I

remembered, it was many thousand, the night went on. I filed and filed, I had worked all my life, it was many thousand. I hung them on a string, I staggered out sinking under the burden. Now I remembered that she could not love me, I an old man who only had to die, I went back and got what I had saved up, it was more than I thought, if I gave her that, all I possessed, then perhaps she would let me die near her. Sinking under the burden I staggered out.

The wind caught hold of me, I rushed on. Exhausted I arrived at her house. I groped for the lock, I tried the keys. One after the other, not one fitted. Not one fitted. It must have been a tiny part of the bit that wouldn't fit in, I knew it needed so little. I knew it. My heart stood still. I was shaking with the rain and the wind, I wanted to sink down. My life was ended, I wanted to sink down. Dazed I staggered out into the street again, drifted about. It was empty and desolate, there was only me. I tried the keys in all the houses, I no longer asked for so much, I didn't ask to die near my child, near her whom I loved, I only asked for a human being, any one, only some one that I could be with when I had to die. I tried and tried, I could get in nowhere. I sank down on the steps of a house I didn't know, and my heart struggled no more. They found me there in the morning with all my keys in my arms. The gold was gone; I hadn't been able to give it to anybody, they had

only taken it from me. But the keys were still there, nobody wanted those.

He left off and sat mute.

Another said: on the slope of a hill lies a very ancient village, it lies in the sun. The streets climb upwards, upwards, their walls are whitewashed, the houses shine, just shine. I and my brothers lived there. They were happy and good, I was wicked and bad, there hadn't been enough to go round. They worked out in the fields, in the evenings they came home. I had a cramped forehead, I was without peace, I lay quiet in a corner and didn't speak. They sat and ate, I had such a grudge against them, I don't know why; afterwards they went out into the street and talked and sang. One played the zither, it sounded so lovely, I lay and wept. It was not a human being, it was a zither, its singing was so wonderfully lovely. They didn't say anything to me, they detested me, why?

I pined away. For me there was nothing. I got something on the quiet and put it in their food, so that they died. It was all I could do. It was all I had in life. It made no difference. All the houses still lay in the sun as before, everybody smiled and was happy. I pined away. I'm only saying this to ask why?

At that another said: I hoarded joy. I stole it from others in order to have it myself, I wanted to be the happiest there was. I never had enough; things went well for me, I hoarded and hoarded, I

was greedy for joy, I never got enough, I grabbed so much for myself that there was nothing left all round me; it was a big country.

When I grew old I began to doubt whether I had been right in what I had done, whether with all that I possessed I could really call myself happy. I reproached myself about much of my life, I felt doubts about myself. But one day I met someone I had robbed, he tottered along, he was ill and wretched to look at. Then I realized that I was right. I was not like him. Then I realized my happiness, which I had stolen for myself. I was rich. He had nothing.

A few days later he died. It was said that the last words he uttered were that he was better dead.

I died too not long after. In the part where we lived I had enormous stretches of country where I went shooting in the autumn. One morning I went out to shoot alone although I was nearing eighty. It was raining, the woods smelt as they do in autumn. I happened to trip and the gun went off. The last I remember is that I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, it was wet, I remember that smell of rain, that was the last, I remember it still and I am filled with all the happiness that comes from having lived.

So they went on with their stories.

Many of them never said anything, you wouldn't have known they were there. Among these was an

old man, small and insignificant, he just sat there and listened to the others. He had a warm heart and took a lively interest in what each one of them said. But when he thought about his own life it seemed to him so humble and almost ridiculous that he was ashamed to think back over it. He listened when the others talked of their own affairs, and he lived himself into their lives, it was as though he had had none himself. Not but that he too had something of his own, something that was his and no one else's. He persuaded himself most of the time that what he called his own was simply that by which he lived the others' lives, that which enabled him to understand everything, himself he was nothing. But at times it broke through as something else, he could feel it so beautiful and strange deep down; but he wasn't able to give it to others. He wanted to give. He wanted to open out. He too wanted to sit and talk of his own modest life, just as the others talked of theirs, of what it was like, what he thought of and what he felt while he lived. But just as he was going to bring it out, he was frightened at seeing how insignificant his existence must seem to everyone else, it must all seem so pitiable to them, they would have to laugh at him, make fun of him, and he didn't want that, because for him life was not pitiable or laughable, not even his own. So he only listened to the others, he had nothing to say himself.

In the others' existence life had been so much

greater than in his, he saw that he ought not to push to the front with what he had, which was so much less; and thus everything seemed more beautiful, as great and beautiful as it really was. They had all experienced something great or rich, in them something had flowered and borne fruit. Perhaps they didn't always feel it themselves as anything so great; but he felt it, knew that it was so. So he listened to everyone and was happy in them. Those who spoke ill of life, he didn't believe those. But even in them there was such passion, such depth in their pain; he understood what their meaning had been and listened, as though to a vast river far away from him. For he had not experienced anything great himself, not felt anything rich and powerful within him, he had only lived with quiet gladness.

In a lavatory under ground he had sat in the box and taken the money. For a penny he had given out a little paper, that was all. That was why he didn't want to talk about his life, it must seem to the others so meaningless and perhaps ridiculous. His whole existence had gone by down there. He had taken the job as a young man, not intending to stay, only so as to have something to do while he waited for his real calling. As time went on he had begun to see that this too was a calling, and that it was his. Why should he not be content? He filled a place that had to be filled; if he didn't do it, then someone else must. That being so, he could do it

just as well. It was an insignificant place, but he was of no significance either. He was an ordinary man, and this was a place for an ordinary man. So he thought, and he stayed, and he was happy.

Although he sat down there from morning till night and seldom saw daylight, yet he came to understand life, and love it above everything. He understood that there was nothing ugly in it, everything was beautiful and good. Some parts were greater, some were less; but everything had its significance, nothing was indifferent or without value, nothing ought to be denied. Not everything could reach greatness, some of it had to be strangely small simply that the rest might be the more remarkable, might rise the higher; for life was rich, but not so rich as all that.

So he sat thinking down there, and as the years went by there was much he understood.

He learnt to know humanity only as it came down there to him. And yet he learnt both to know it and to understand it. They made their way down there to him not to carry out any great deeds, not to live, not to be human in the highest sense; they came to carry out a common act which was shared by all that lived! But there was nothing low, nothing degrading to them in the act; they were something great and noble, and he loved them. He particularly loved one kind of man, those who were strong, collected, those whom you felt life had taken hold of, in order to use, in order to compel to its own

end. There was such a calm about them, and even down here such a simple dignity, that they filled him with assurance and confidence. He could sit and hear their sounds from out of the closets; yet when they came out all memory of the act inside was blotted out for them, they were nothing but passion, nothing but a struggle to reach the one, the greatest. He was able to sit for a long while afterwards and feel glad about them, remember their faces, think how they were now going about up there in the sun and doing life's great deeds with a clear confidence. Such were his thoughts about humanity, that was how he saw it.

But humanity paid no attention to him, hardly noticed him. He handed them their paper; after that he meant no more to them. There were a few whom he recognized from a long time back, they came year after year, they grew bent and grey, they aged with him. But they didn't know him. Even now in eternity he still sat and listened for humanity and believed in it. They didn't know he was there, he might just as well not have been. But he was all amongst them, and he was happy. Now as so often when he was alive he sometimes longed to be able to give himself, to be able to open his heart, to make somebody a gift of what he had collected; but when he felt that what he possessed was not his, that with him more than with others it belonged solely to life itself, then he contented himself with listening, with gathering in and

gathering in, as if he knew that it would nevertheless some time be passed on to another, to one greater than himself.

There were many less happy than he. Many were afflicted by their loneliness, by being different from everybody else, because no one was like them and so no one could feel the things they most deeply felt. There were two like this, they sat a little way off, by themselves, they could not understand the others nor be understood by them. They could not understand each other either, but they could talk together, each about himself. The one was without a thumb on his right hand, he had never had one, and it had made him lonely all his life. He had felt that he was something set apart, that he was different from everybody else, he felt it even now. He had not considered himself as an outlaw, stricken by an unhappy fate, he had lived among men, met many, come close to many; and yet he had always felt that there was a certain something that divided him from them, an invisible wall which no one could penetrate or break down. They might talk to him as to others, they might think they had reached his innermost being; but they could not conceive who he was, for he was other than they.

Now as he sat in eternity he was able to see how right he had been in his feeling that he was something quite set apart, and to understand how deep his individuality lay in his nature; even now he was

without a thumb on his right hand. Now he felt still more how perfectly alone he was. He could sit and listen to what the others said, but it would somehow glide past him, it was as if they spoke another language. He didn't understand them, and they didn't understand him, for they were not like him, without a thumb on their right hand. So he altogether abandoned himself to grief over his loneliness, dug himself into it, deeper and deeper, lived solely for it.

The other had all his fingers intact, but he had a black spot on the nail of one middle finger. He had had it even as a child, but it had never been wiped out. He went through the whole of his life with that spot on his nail, he grew old, he died with it. The strange thing was that many did not even suspect his loneliness, they noticed nothing, they thought he was like them. He was forced to smile gently when he thought about it: he was different from the whole world and the world had no suspicion of it. But he himself carried it like a burden that weighed him down to the earth. He sought mankind one after another, but no one was like him; he believed that the spot which made him a stranger in life would at last be wiped out by life itself, which gave it him; but it was not wiped out. His loneliness grew and grew, it felt like an empty waste around him wherever he went. He didn't complain, nobody knew of his suffering, nobody knew that he sought and sought one in the whole

world who was like him. He passed out of life without anybody suspecting his struggle.

Now that he sat here in the darkness he couldn't see the black spot on his nail. But he knew that it was there. He felt more deeply than ever the strangeness of his fate. There was an emptiness around him as boundless as the impenetrable darkness.

It was a quiet satisfaction to them both that they had found each other. They could sit talking together, after all there was a little warmth in that. But they couldn't understand each other. They understood that they were both alone, but they didn't understand each other's loneliness. Each knew his own suffering, but he couldn't grasp the other's, only dimly sense it like a dwindling flame far off in the night. The one had a black spot on one nail, but he was not without a thumb on his right hand. The other was without a thumb on his right hand, but he had no spot on his nail. So their eternities passed.

Not far from them sat a man and woman talking in whispers to each other. They spoke so low that no one could hear what they said, you heard only the passion underneath the words. They had loved each other a whole lifetime. They sought each other still. The man said:

When I love you it is as if I were living as a stranger far away in a great land where I was not born. I see the trees and the mountains, I see the

clouds and the hovering birds, a great, strange land. I hear the wind rustling in the light woods, I hear the rivers roaring deep down in the valleys. And I stand listening and listening. It is not my land where I was born. When I love it I long for my own land far away, where I was born.

The woman said: When I am with you I am happy.

But the man said: You have never understood me, you have never reached me, nor I you.

The woman said: I have loved you.

The man said: You never understood why I lived. I have struggled and suffered, built up and pulled down. I have sought and sought, I have doubted and doubted. And you?

The woman said: I have believed.

He sat thinking about himself, saw everything, brought everything together. He said: I have struggled in the cause of life.

The woman said: I have lived.

They were quiet, each alone with what was theirs.

The man said: Now we are both dead.

And I still long for you.

The woman said: And I am still with you, beloved.

But a simple working man who sat ignored among all the others then began to speak, he said timidly and as if looking in on himself:

I long for home.

THE ETERNAL SMILE

I had a little home in one of the poor suburbs, but we were not poor, we had two rooms and a kitchen, one with sun in the morning. Everywhere it was clean and cared-for, white cloths on the tables in the windows, and on the table in the front room a big yellow cloth that my wife had crocheted. We were happy and wanted for nothing. When I came home in the evening from the factory, where the work was heavy and laborious, I was black and sooty and I couldn't touch anything, I washed and changed my clothes, until then I couldn't hold the youngster; but he wanted to come to his father as soon as I came in at the door, I had to keep him off.

At first, before I had a home, I used to go to bed dirty as I was, I didn't care, nothing meant anything to me, it didn't matter. Now everything mattered. When I looked round me, every little thing meant that I was happy. We had supper together, then we sat for a while, we didn't light the lamp. The boy came and climbed up on to my knee. He pretended that I was a horse and he was riding far away in a great forest where it was all dark, but the horse found the way home again. He went to sleep on my arm; the cheek that had been lying against me was red. That's why I long for home.

Afterwards we sat and talked about him, it was as if we were talking about ourselves. My wife had a lilting voice which I can never forget. It began to get dark. I remember the pattern on the plates, and a picture on the wall, I remember the chest of

drawers and the old brown sofa and the youngster's engine on the floor, that's why I long for home.

So he spoke, quietly, dreaming back to what had been his.

But in another part a man was talking about his life to some of them who found it interesting to listen to him. He was young. He seemed not to have needed very long for living. He described everything in great detail, from beginning to end, it seemed trustworthy and well thought out beforehand. Slowly he told his story.

I arrive one evening at an old mill in the woods. It is not yet very late in the evening, it seems as if everything is fresh and beginning anew. The sun's light falls obliquely into the wood, the birds are still singing; it is like morning. The dew is on the grass, it wets my horse's hoofs. 'It is in the spring. There is a smell of earth and big trees.

The road I am following seems to go through the miller's yard. So I ride in under the gateway, not intending to stay but to go on further. But inside it is so charming and strange that I have to draw rein and look about me for a while. On all four sides run low white buildings, which look as if they have been whitened by the flour that has sifted out from the mill and from the sacks when they were loaded on to the wagons. Even the ground is dusted with flour; my horse shies at it and paws up the black earth with one hoof. But to me it seems altogether an idyllic scene. It is so peaceful with its sheltering

walls, and yet there is some massiveness and richness about it that makes it impressive. In the yard stands an old cart, from whose front wheels the rims are gone and the spokes almost rotted away, until it looks as if it has gone down on its knees. It stands outside the mill itself, which is a massive building, broad and prosperous and with a big black hatch in the middle. As I sit there in the saddle, this hatch, which is a little way above the ground, is opened, and out of the darkness inside comes the miller and behind him his wife. I feel sure that it must be the miller and his wife. He is a powerful, swarthy man, with dusty clothes but with hands like an engineer's, oily, greasy, as if he tended an engine; he looks serious and dependable. But his wife, who would be about forty or fifty, is fat and jolly, looks like a great gorged beast which is waiting until it can manage to eat some more. Her breasts lie like fat loaves down the front of her body, which she turns full towards me, and two well-fed arms rest between them and her stomach. She looks at me with round good-natured eyes that haven't any brows, and greets me with a jerk of the fat neck. I reply in the elated tone of one who is on horseback and has ridden all day in the woods. The charming atmosphere of the place too has put me into high spirits. I tell them what a pleasant surprise it is to find such a secluded little corner here so far away in the woods, let them see how taken with it I am. The miller doesn't reply, he stands looking up into

the air. But the woman gives me a soft ingratiating smile: Yes, it's lovely here. I enlarge further on the excellences of the place, how spick-and-span everything is, how clean the curtains up at the windows are, how neat the yard is with its white flour, and how pleasing it looks with the old cart stuck there, the stumps of its legs in the ground. The miller's wife takes it all in. She stands straddled in the middle of the opening and beams. The miller stands with his legs together.

At last she asks me if I won't come in and look round the mill. Yes, I should very much like to. So I jump down from my horse and look about for a ring in the wall where I can tie him up. But there are no rings. I shall have to make him fast to the old abandoned cart, that will be all right. Then I clamber up to the miller and his wife. It's a bit strenuous, for the opening is placed rather high up and there are no steps, my feet slip on the floury wall. When I finally get up to them I am panting from the effort. The miller's wife brushes me down with an amiability which seems almost familiar, and smiles so that two great tusks are visible at the very back of the otherwise toothless mouth. The miller is serious as the grave. We go on into the mill.

The droning begins. But mellow; thick and mealy. The mill-stones don't make much noise, large and heavy though they are. They go round placidly, they put you in a lazy good humour. You feel there is a lot of flour between them, it is a rather

catches sight of me she stops and smiles good-naturedly. But I can see that she is put out. She wants to know what we can have been doing out there so long. I reply that it was so magnificent that one could hardly bring oneself to come away, and ask her why she wouldn't go out too. She says that it's so slippery on the planks, and besides she can't get through the narrow door. Then I look at her and burst out laughing, I can't help it. But she isn't uncomfortable. She strokes herself slowly over her fat thighs and gives me a glance whose meaning I don't quite understand. Then she wonders why her husband doesn't come, what he can be up to out there. He is greasing the wheel, I say off-hand, as if that were perfectly natural. At that she goes to the door with an impatient jerk of her head. She sticks her head out into the darkness and calls to him. But he seems not to hear. She calls again, nobody comes. I go up to her to see what I can do. Over her head I can see him sitting there as before doing the greasing. He seems so idiotic crouched there that I have to laugh. We both of us call out. But he neither hears nor sees. The mill-wheel roars in the darkness, it is almost horrible; he greases and greases. We call out again, both at the same time. He doesn't stir. At that she slams the door so that the whole house resounds with it and fastens the latch on the inside.

But immediately afterwards she is again amiability itself, just as if nothing has happened. And

between her and myself nothing has happened, it is only her husband she is put out with of course. We begin to talk about one thing and another, odds and ends, what fine weather it is, and how hard it may be to flay an elephant alive, the kind of thing you talk about when you don't know what to say. She shows a lively interest the whole time. In the end I say that I must be setting off, that I must be getting on further and not lose any more time. She looks at me surprised and asks what I can be thinking of, what I mean, going on further. Further, I say, I mean I shall carry on a bit before it gets pitch dark. Carry on? she says. But the road ends here! What! I exclaim, astonished. The road ends here? She nods her head. She puts her arms on her stomach and a good-natured smile spreads over her whole face. Yes, this is the end, she repeats again.

It is a bit of a shock to me. And here was I supposing it to be a proper road going on further. No, sir, she says, and smiles so that the two tusks are visible at the very back of her mouth, if you had wanted to go on further, sir, then you should have turned off at the little fork, sir, a hundred miles back in the woods, there you should have turned to the left, sir. And then you should have gone to the right, sir, and then to the left, and then to the right, and then to the right again, and then to the left. I exclaim: Good heavens! She adds: That's the proper way. But of course no one finds it.

I feel this really is a shock. But she consoles me good-naturedly: It's so lovely here, isn't it, so it doesn't matter. You can very well stay the night here, sir, and then try to begin again early to-morrow morning; I'm sure we shall make you comfortable, sir, as well as we can manage. And we've got an attic where you sleep like a log right on into the day.

I can't help feeling touched by her kindness, annoyed as I am at having been delayed in this way. I stand turning it over in my mind; then gratefully accept her invitation. It may really be a pleasant little experience to spend the night in such a charming and strange old mill in the middle of the woods, it will always be something to remember later on in life. And it really will be fine to have a bite of supper perhaps, and then stretch out in a good bed. I am glad things have turned out as they have.

She leads me through a dark passage-way into the dwelling-house, and opens a door into a big comfortable room. She lights the candles, thick yellow candles that look to me as if they can never burn out; they spread a warm, cosy light over everything. She leaves me alone for a while, just getting something to eat, she says. There are clean curtains at all the windows, a freshly scrubbed floor, a big dazzling white cloth on the huge table. Everything is so wholesome and honest. I have to sit down and feel how well I am, how satisfied with

everything. I'm hungry too, it will be nice to have something to eat.

She comes in with the food. First a great trough of porridge and a cask of beer, which she trundles in through the door with her foot. It is meal porridge with a thick layer of sugar and cinnamon on top, and a huge lump of butter in the middle and running down to the edges. We sit down one on each side of the table stuffing away till we choke, and drinking beer. We finish up the whole troughful. I gasp with the effort. She wipes her mouth contentedly.

Next she brings in an enormous dish of fried eels floating in oil. They're so fat they quiver on the plate and slide away under your fork. We eat them with our fingers. The oil runs down our necks. They're very good. She eats a vast amount. I eat a good deal too. It seems strange to me that I can eat so much, I don't need much as a rule. It's as if I'd never eaten in all my life. I drink beer with it till I'm fit to burst. When we have finally cleaned up the dish she goes out and gets the next course. It's the roast. It's so large that I can't see her as she brings it in, I feel I can't manage any more. But it is so deliciously browned that I have to try a little bit of this too. She gives me a staggering helping. She helps herself to twice as much. We eat.

We eat in silence. We don't say a word. I hear her chewing with the tusks at the back of her mouth, that is all. And I see her round eyes that haven't

any brows, they are clear and natural; mine feel misted over, stupefied. I feel more and more bemused with the food and the beer. Most of all with the food, which lies so heavy in my stomach that I can't stir. I am completely befuddled. And yet I help myself to more. Seeing her eat, I can't bear not to eat as well. I eat dully, listlessly, force down the food bit by bit; at last the meat has almost come to an end. She shifts the last piece on to her plate.

When she has finished she gets up with a motherly smile and goes out into the kitchen again. I feel as if my body were a lump of lead. I lean my arms on the table and gaze dully round me. I raise myself and let out wind so that the room gets as hot as a bake-oven. I am drunk. But everything seems lovely to me. I feel thoroughly happy. Everything is so simple and natural and so different from what I had thought. I sit and ponder on life, and understand a great deal that I've never understood before. It fits itself together for me, it is all so calm and secure and healthy. I feel about everything that it is as it is. I am happy.

She comes in with a fresh dish. It is pork, the boiled rump of a pig, fat as butter. It sticks far out over the edge of the dish. I look at it calmly. I find nothing strange in the idea of eating a little more. It no longer puts me off. I understand the meaning of everything.

We sit down to it. I don't eat in the same way as

before. I eat slowly, painstakingly. I eat in order to get satisfied. The food gives me pleasure, a simple, natural pleasure. I am completely sober.

We don't speak a word. I think she looks a good sort. A real little countrywoman, as they ought to be. And she knows how to look after you. We eat. When there isn't quite so much left I make sure of helping myself to the rest, it's good to be eating. I sop up the fat with a bit of bread.

Then for a sweet she brings in an almond cake, not so very large, I think. She cuts it into twenty slices. We help ourselves and eat in silence. I turn over a great many things in my mind, it is very good, this cake, with the sweet almond; it's satisfying too.

When it is finished I get up from the table, push the chair under, bow to the woman and thank her. I thank her briefly but very courteously. It was both ample and good, I say. And taking a few unsteady steps round the cosy room and rubbing my hands satisfied and contented, I add: And now it will be fine to go and curl up for a bit. Why, yes, she answers at once, that will be fine. And she throws me her motherly glance.

So she takes a candle and tells me to follow her. We go through a narrow passage and up a poky staircase. I follow behind the whole time. On the stairs I see her backside and the groove. But I just see it, apart from that it doesn't bother me, I don't feel that it matters. We reach my bedroom. It is a cheerful, pleasant room with light walls, and three

big windows looking out on to the river; I can hear it roaring down below. Against one of the inner walls stands a roomy bed with clean, freshly laundered sheets. The woman puts down the candle on a chair beside the bed, its light flickers over the floor. I get a great feeling of comfort and well-being when I look round me. It will really be fine to have my sleep out thoroughly. Seeing how contented I am the woman smiles with such a good-natured grin that the two tusks again stick out at the very back of her mouth; between them there is nothing but empty gums, which stand agape like a fox trap. She's admirable, I think. She arranges the bed a little, smoothes it down with a tender hand; then she hugs her arms together under her breasts so that they lie there like lumps of dough in a great trough, and asks me if there's anything else I want. No thanks, I reply, a little confused. So she goes towards the door. There she turns round and asks me once again, a little more sharply, it seems to me, if I'm sure there's nothing more I need. No thanks, I say again, a little amused. At that she goes with a kindly good night.

Once she is outside the door I begin slowly to take off my clothes. My body feels rather heavy and gorged. I take my time so as thoroughly to enjoy the prospect of going to bed. The candle flickers over the broad honest floor-boards as I go padding about. Then I creep down in between the sheets.

They are lovely and warm. Everything is

lovely and warm. When I stretch out my legs they rub lightly against my knees, just pleasantly rough. It's lovely. I rest my hands on my stomach and gaze up at the ceiling. Everything is whitewashed and neat. Walls and ceiling. The tallow candle spreads its warm light over the room. White, clean curtains at the windows. And the river drones and roars down below, it's all very pleasant.

I lie and ponder over life, how pleasant it is. I drowse off further and further and understand it all. I think of the woman. I can see her ripe and wholesome, so simple and straightforward. People ought to be like that, then you could really be fond of them. The food lies in my stomach heavy and good. I can't move. It's so lovely and warm all through my body, it gets better and better. There is neither beginning nor end to anything. My head swims a little. I feel slightly tipsy with well-being, it's lovely. I doze off. Then sleep, I suppose.

Long afterwards, many years afterwards, so it seems, I feel as if somebody has come into the room. I half open my eyes, it's the woman apparently. She has nothing on any more. Her fat thighs flop against each other as she comes up to the bed. But she is serious, not quite the same as before. You should remember to put out the light, she says rather firmly; and she sits on it, it sizzles. Yes, I say, of course. Then she creeps into bed.

It seems just right to me. I am happy. I put my arms round her neck. With that she begins to

open out to me. We talk about life. We feel the same about everything. She talks a lot about food, I do too. I tell her how much I admired her full figure from the very first. She lays the loaves against me. Then many years pass.

I feel very drowsy and happy. I wonder for a moment how my horse can be getting on. He has eaten himself to death, she says, that was a long while ago. Oh, really, I say. I think about life a great deal. I think how great and lovely it is. I love her a great deal, there is neither beginning nor end. And the miller? I wonder. He is greasing the wheel, she says. Oh yes, I say. Then many years pass.

At last I wake, there is something droning a long way off. I sit up in the darkness, rub my eyes. I see nothing. But I hear something roaring and roaring, heavy and monotonous. It is the river. I lie down. It is the river. The woman snores. I hear everything. I am clear-headed and sober. She lies with her back against me, it is warm. The river roars and roars, stronger and stronger, more and more violent, undiminishing. It is all so tremendous, it makes me dizzy, I can't bear it, it is too vast.

I start up. I rush to the window. I throw it open. The roar bursts in upon me, furious, shattering, it seizes hold of me. I fling myself down.

The water grips me, it is icy-cold. It hurls me with it in its rush. It roars, roars. It hurls me against the mill-wheel, against the great iron-

covered paddles. They lacerate me, the blood foams, froths.

But in the starlight I see the miller, waving his arms above his head, and shrieking madly with triumph and exultation in the darkness, his mouth wide open. It is boundless, overpowering. I give up my soul in ecstasy. Then there is nothing.

Now that I am dead I don't know what it's about. I don't know what it meant or what it means. I only describe it as it seemed to me, nothing more.

He stopped.

Those who had been listening thought it a rather strange story. They made their comments, for it or against it. Then they too left off, returned to themselves.

But far away from them all, in another part, motionless and shut in on himself, sat a young man, dead long ago. His face was delicate and still kept its youth, he talked to himself every evening; he said:

She wanders down there among the flowers. She walks in the woods under the great trees and thinks about me. She sits outside her father's house and remembers me.

It's evening now and she steals away on the noiseless path through the jungle and it grows dusk. She sits down by the river, on the low bank with the scent of the lotus flower. There she waits for me, while it grows dusk. She waits for the white gleam of my boat with the water singing softly

Then the young man turned away from him, but spoke quietly into the darkness with an ardent voice:

Beloved, this night I am not coming to you, this night I cannot come. But to-morrow I shall be with you. To-morrow when it grows dusk my boat will glide up the river to you who wait for me where the lotus flower sheds its scent. Beloved, to-morrow I shall be with you.

So he spoke in the darkness.

No one answered him any more, the old man sat sunk in his thoughts, everything was empty and waste. But from far away, from far down in the darkness came a strangely drawn-out, bellowing cry, infinitely plaintive, like a beast weeping. They all knew it, but they didn't know what it was. It was something that didn't belong with them.

It was a man who had lived too long ago. He sat on his haunches, he had hair over his body, his nose was flattened, his mouth huge and half-opened. No one knew who he was, not even himself, he didn't remember having lived. He only remembered a smell, a smell of a great forest, of resin and wet moss. And a smell of another being, of something which was warm like him, something which was like him. He didn't remember that it was a human being. He only remembered the smell. Then he sniffed around him in the darkness with nostrils distended and bellowed like a beast weeping. It sounded horrible. It was such an agonizing

wail of boundless sorrow and yearning that they shuddered. But he wasn't one of them.

They lived their life, seeking and seeking, they suffered and struggled, believed and doubted; they didn't bellow.

No one spoke for a long while. It was desolate. It felt as if it were night around them and cold.

But for two children, a boy of twelve and a girl, who sat talking together without a pause, it was morning. For them it was always morning. They had so much to talk about that they neither heard nor saw anything else, and everything was fresh and certain for them. The boy especially could describe everything between heaven and earth, he stumbled over himself he was so bursting with things to say. The girl admired him boundlessly. It was incredible how much he knew, how much he had met with and seen, how much he had found to do. And how thrilling it had been all the time. He snared pike in a lake in the summer, in a rushy creek, the sun blazed, the grasshoppers scraped with their thighs, it was so quiet that you hardly dare breathe, but there was a sucking when you lifted your feet, because it was soggy. He snared such a lot that he could hardly manage to carry them home, then he fried them for himself and anyone else who was hungry; sometimes there was enough for a whole house, the one he lived in.

But he had a lot more to see to as well, although most of it had to do with the water. One Sunday,

in the winter, he had had to pull out another boy who had gone through a hole in the ice before it was properly frozen; he was a good lad, it was well worth pulling him out, he was his best friend, he was sure to turn out well in time.

So he got to know about the whole world, and decided to be a sailor and see everything and do everything. And once in springtime he made himself a sailing-boat out of a plank and a shirt—one that he stole from his father, because he was bigger. He was going over to the other side. It was blowing just right, with the water grey, it made him tickle all over his body. But out in the middle came a wind that he had not reckoned with. It upset the plank and he was gone. But it was thrilling the whole time, and anyhow it was his own fault because he was clumsy with the sail. Yes, he had done any number of things, one sort and another.

The girl listened to him with shining eyes, she was as proud and enraptured as he was. She egged him on with delighted exclamations and little wondering remarks. She constantly wanted more. And there always was still more that he'd done. He had kept rabbits, and had his own potato plot which had to be looked after and turned over. He had gone in a train, twenty miles by himself. He could tell which clouds came with rain and which were only to look at. He knew when the sun rose. He had had a gun too, and some days he would go shooting sparrows with it. That seemed rather cruel

to her though. But when he said it wasn't, because anyhow there were so many left, then she realized that he was right about that. He knew the names of all the animals and was able to imitate their cries and all the other sounds down on the earth. He knew all about the world, an incredible amount.

She hadn't done very much herself. She'd only played hopscotch and picked flowers, she didn't know how to do anything else. But that didn't matter, now she had him she'd got to know just the same what great fun everything was.

They were both happy. Things were all right for them, as they should be. And there was such a lot that there was no danger that they would ever get to the end. They realized there was enough. The darkness around them shone with things they had brought with them. They were perfectly happy.

A man said: It was one morning, I went to put up fences for the animals who were to be turned out next day, it was early. I went through the birch meadows where I had played about as a child, they smelt of fresh leaves; and the secret places for wild strawberries, I knew them all. I went along thinking about nothing. I went thinking about the trees and the openings between them, I recognized them. I went along thinking of her whom I loved, who sat at home in the farm waiting for me and for our first child, whom she was soon to bring into the world. The birds were singing everywhere, the cuckoo was calling up on the hills where there were

oaks. I thought about everything. I thought, I'll gather a few strawberries for them to eat at home to-night. Just as I was going along I heard something murmuring and muttering. It was the stream. I knew it well. I'd had a water-wheel there when I was a boy. I went and walked a little way by the side of it. Some way up I found the stones that I'd jammed the axle in between, they lay just as they used. There was a lot of water this year; good thing, the corn would be doing well. I thought of all the days in spring when I'd scrambled about on these stones. Then from further down in the meadow I heard some youngsters playing and went along to them for a bit. They were busy with a water-wheel which had tin on the edges of the paddles, it wasn't finished yet; they looked up, sweating. I said, there used to be a better flow further up. They said, it's stronger here now. I looked on for a while. Then I went across the boggy patch up on to the path again.

The sun struck warm already. I took some bark off a birch and made a basket, and gathered it full of strawberries; I knew the places. I didn't care so much for strawberries myself any more, it was for them at home. I came to our piece of land where my work was.

I put down the basket in the grass. I pulled out the fencing that I'd carted there the week before, and took some birch twigs for binding, for there wasn't much juniper on our land; the leaves

smelt strong. I worked at my job while the sun mounted.

I am thankful for a morning long ago.

So he talked of it, his face was fresh and clear.

One man sat thinking over what he had. He was a murderer. He had murdered a man, it had taken fifty years, he had had to learn. First there had been a long, long day, a brilliant unending day. He worked in the sunshine, his work was to lay foundations, the day had no end. He loved a woman, she loved him. They had many children. He took them about in the woods, he taught them about all the trees, about the sea and clouds and stones. They got bigger. The sons grew up, they thought his way. The girls thought their mother's way. They all grew and increased. He got a big beard. The sons were bearded too, and spoke gruffly, like him. The girls were married and had children. The sons too. Everything increased, multiplied. There was more and more of everything. The sun shone and shone, it couldn't set. There was one whom he wanted to murder, it was too light. He worked and worked, he was always happy. The day never came to an end. He grew bald, he bought himself a fur cap. There was one whom he wanted to murder. Then it grew dark at last.

He crept out on to the road. Clouds were blowing across the sky. He crept across the fields. The other was in front of him the whole time. He

in the wall facing the valley. An old fire was flickering on the trodden earth floor. At first we couldn't make out anything, then we saw an ancient creature, a hunched woman, sooty and lean. She sat poking the fire, she was one-eyed. We have lost our way, we said. Yes, she replied, as if she knew it. I could see that she was not one of our people, it was oppressive and strange. I wanted to get away from it, down to the valley again, to sun and trees, to houses and people, I knew I could get there alone once it was light again. But Giuditta sat down and stared like the old woman into the fire. She asked her who she was. The old woman said she was no one. Then you are not human? No, said the old woman, I keep watch over humans. Giuditta said: You shall read my future; and she held out her hand. She lay close to the fire, her legs were red, her breasts were big and heavy. I knew how I loved her, I wanted to take her away, to rush through the darkness with her down to the valley, to houses and people, to sun and trees. I knew I could get there alone even in the dark; but she didn't hear me or see me. The old woman took her hand and looked at it a long while. Then she said: When you bear a child you must die.

Giuditta drew her hand away slowly. I stood pale, I could feel that I was trembling. In a strange, submissive voice Giuditta asked: Why must I die? The old woman said: In you life has grown full.

We both went towards the door, neither saw

the other. We stood staring down at the fire. We asked the way home. The old woman described it for us, it was easy to find when she said it, we went out into the dark. We went along silently side by side, we didn't hold each other's hand in the way we used. I hadn't thought about life, I had only lived, I knew nothing of love. I listened for Giuditta's steps in the dark.

The path plunged steeply. Giuditta stumbled over a stone, I put out my hand to steady her and touched her arm. I knew that I loved her and wanted to save her from all harm.

We went further and further down the mountain-side, it no longer dropped so steeply, we struck a path that I knew. Then it grew light. The whole valley was spread out broad and rich in front of us, the sun flooded it, it seemed endless. I breathed freely. I stood still for joy. I saw my father's house, I saw all the houses, I saw the trees and the birds, the whole of life. Then I thought I understood the meaning of everything, how great and light everything was.

Giuditta stood close beside me, like me she looked out over the valley. But her glance passed over everything veiled and withdrawn. Then she drew close to me and kissed me passionately with her arms heavy round my neck. I stood intoxicated, we had never kissed each other before. But when I looked down into her face I was frightened and held her away from me. I knew how I loved her,

how I would protect her, cherish her, how I would live my life with her, live for ever. But then she struggled close to me with her whole body, tore her clothes away from her full breasts, they smelt milky. I breathed heavily, she bore me to the earth, gave up her body to me, I wanted only to live, only to live. She lay smiling. Her eyes grew dim and heavy, life and death flowed together into eyes that saw nothing.

We went on again in silence. We had not spoken to each other all the way home.

My father's house was strange, strangely large and light. I built myself another, further away. Giuditta joined me. We lived together happily. That year there was more wine than usual and more corn and more olives. I pruned the vine-stocks bare so that next year they should yield an even richer harvest, I ploughed the fields black round our house; Giuditta was with child, she walked slowly along the meadows.

Next spring came and she was to bear the child. It was a hot day, in the middle of the day. She didn't cry out, she only struggled. When she had borne the child she was dead. Her blood was too rich and fierce, it wanted her to die.

I took the child in my arms. It was so small. I clutched it to my breast, looked around me, alone. The whole house was silent, only myself. I stood crushed with heavy pain.

Then a long way off I heard a song. A mono-

tonous, happy song that I recognized. I stood listening. With bent head I went outside the door, with the child held close to me.

Through the valley came a slow procession. In front went a man carrying a symbol of the phallus on a pole, he carried it high in the sun, after him followed all the people singing. It was an old custom of our fathers for this day in the spring, in the time of fertilizing. I stood holding my child close to my breast, it was so small. I gazed and gazed as the great procession advanced. I thought it strange they should be keeping that feast to-day. The sun shone without end, they all sang the same monotonously happy song, I went to meet them across the fields.

In the middle of the valley they stopped. I stopped a little way from them, I was like a stranger. I gazed and gazed at all the people. I saw my father, I saw my mother, I saw them all. And I saw all the trees and all the placid houses in the village, the whole of life.

Then I thought I understood the meaning of everything. Then I understood that life wills only itself. It wills trees, it wills people, it wills flowers smelling on the earth; but not any one of them.

Life has no love for you tree, life has no love for you man, for you flower, for you waving grass, except when it means just you. When it no longer means you, it loves you no more but blots you out.

Then I understood the meaning of life.

The sun shone. The sun shone as never before. It was charged with light and heat as never before. My head grew heavy. Dazed I stood with my child in my arms, it was still wet from its mother's womb; dazed I stood and joined in the happy, monotonous song, like my father and mother, like all people on the earth.

Then the ground began to tremble under us. The mountains opened, burning earth burst out of them, poured down towards us, down over the valley, engulfing all, the sky shook with the roar.

Terror-struck I pressed the child to my breast. But I stood motionless, just waiting. And when I looked round I saw all the people were standing motionless. They were just waiting. It was as though they understood that they must die. But they sang their happy, monotonous song, the only thing they had. We were consumed by the burning earth.

Now all that is empty desert. Rocks that crumble, that turn to dust. Sand circling in the fierce sun.

He sat silent. Then he said quietly:

I don't think life wills trees and people, I don't think life wills flowers and waving grass, except when it means just that. Otherwise it would just as soon be nothing. Empty desert. Sand circling in barren space.

Then he stopped.

They sat oppressed at the end of his story.

Many struggled with what was not theirs. But no one had anything to say.

Then at last a man spoke, he sat amongst the others, but it was not as if he were speaking to them. He was squatting, with his arms round his knees, motionless, but in his hand he held a staff like a wanderer:

I am homesick for my country. I am homesick for the great desert where I was alone. I am homesick for my country which no foot has trodden, which no people has burdened with its roads. I am homesick for my country which has no bounds, for the burning sun which has no shade. For my sky which is waste and empty, which is red from the burning sand.

I am homesick for my country where I wasted away and had to die. I am homesick for the great desert where I was alone.

They listened to him, wondering. They asked themselves who he was, they didn't know.

But now while they struggled in vain to overcome what had been said, another began to speak; his voice was slow and clear, and infinitely gentle: I was the saviour of mankind, my life was to suffer and die. My life was to teach mankind suffering and death, so to deliver them from the gladness of life.

I was a stranger on earth. Everything was for me so strangely distant. The trees never came near me, the mountains lingered far off from me. When I stood by the sea its smell was as faint as a

flower's, when I walked on the ground it could not feel my step. No wind touched me, my clothes were motionless, still. All is appearance, all is a waiting for what is. All is a longing for what is, all is pain at living.

I called god my father, I knew he was my father and that heaven was my home, where he waited for me. I called distress my brother, because it delivered me from life and from what is not. I called death my best friend, who was to reunite me with him who for a few years of his eternity had allowed me to live. I bore the sorrow of all that lives.

And mankind nailed me on my cross where I had to suffer and die.

Then I spoke to my father. To him I cried out all my humble faith and love. To him I cried out the anguish of living in all that lives, the yearning of all that lives home to what is. And he covered me in darkness, he covered the whole earth in darkness, in order to hide it from the eyes of the seeing.

Then mankind bowed the knee around the cross, then all mankind on the whole earth bowed the knee, and hailed me as their saviour, him who delivered them from life and all that is not. It was empty and desolate the whole world over, I gave up my soul on the tree of the cross.

He ceased. Moved, they waited for his words. He said quietly:

When I came here, then I had no father. I was a man like you.

And the sorrow of life was not my sorrow. The sorrow of life was a happy sorrow, not what I bore.

So he ended.

But scarcely had he ceased before another began to speak, in another voice:

I was the saviour of mankind. My whole life was sheer gladness, it smelt of earth.

I did not come in order to save them, I saved them by coming. I taught them all the glory of life simply by living.

I was born to rule over the whole earth. When I grew to youth I rode through my country. It was in the summer, the day was luminous. All was close to me, all men, all trees and flowers, all things on the ground, all was at one with me. Then I understood that life is all, there is nothing else. I took a woman, she bore me a son, he was like me, he too was for life. I gathered my people, I led them out to fight against others, I taught them all to live and die. We all fought in the sun, we the conquerors, we the conquered. We all saw the loveliness of life and how it had a beginning and an end. Heroes bled to death, the dead were forgotten for all the living.

It was one morning, the war-trumpets blew. I charged on my horse far in front of my people, without armour, but with gleaming weapons. A man thrust his sword into my breast, I drew it out and

knew that I must die. Bloody, I went on fighting in order not to lose the last lovely hour of my life. I fought more mightily than ever in the brilliant sun. A youth came against me, arrogant as I. I struck him down. As he lay dying on the ground he turned and gazed after me with a long, strange look. It was not hatred in his gloomy eyes, but he gazed with envy after one who was going towards life while he had to leave all and die. I bared my breast and showed him my great open wound. He understood and died with a smile.

But now when I felt death approaching I rode alone out of the battle and the clamour. With my bleeding wound I rode along over the lovely ground. I saw the flowers and the trees, I saw the hills and all the roads, I saw all the bright villages in the valleys, and the birds circling above them. All was so near me, all was at one with me. Then I understood that life was all, that there was nothing else. I died upright, gazing round me.

He ceased. Then he said:

And yet nevertheless it was not all.

And the gladness of life was not my gladness. The gladness of life was obscure and incomprehensible, not like mine. I was a man like all others, I had perceived nothing.

When he had said this there was heard a young, singing voice, slender and timid, like a child's:

I was the saviour of mankind.

I was born to tell them all, to reveal to them the

innermost meaning of everything. Within me I carried the hidden nature of life, as others carry faith and doubt. When I thought about anything around me I understood not only what I saw, but also all that I did not see. I came into a great room where everything was gathered together and where it was always light and still.

Because it was light I stayed there a little while. I was just a child.

I didn't think much about what I possessed, I only carried it with me. But I felt my secret growing within me, each morning it was with me and there was sun upon the whole earth when I came out to play in the dewy grass under the trees. And I knew how everything stood waiting for me, how everything living stood waiting for me, everything happy and everything dejected, until some day I should utter what was mine, what, smiling, I possessed.

I was only fourteen, then I had to die. I carried the hidden nature of life within me, therefore I had to die.

They listened dispirited to the childlike voice. They sat there silent and helpless in the dark.

But one declared:

As for me, I was head-waiter at one of the biggest restaurants, known and frequented by all. It is a difficult and important position, it's a matter of understanding everybody's wishes and just what they want in order to have a pleasant time. I had an

attractive personality and everyone regarded me as well fitted for my post. I knew how to arrange things so as to make it pleasant.

It's such small things that count, but they take a lot of finding out. A few flowers in a bowl, tables tastefully set, that may make all the difference. And service without a hitch, that's more important than almost anything. It's not easy. You must learn to understand people's wants and adapt yourself to them. I knew all that, and they had confidence in me. When they left everyone declared that it had been very pleasant.

I was indispensable. But I too had to go my way some time, like everyone else. Then of course they had to find a new head-waiter, for they can't get on without a head-waiter. I hope he had an attractive personality so that they still have a pleasant time.

Shaken to their very depths they heard him to the end. Uncertainty and pain filled them as never before, harried them and took all peace from them. They didn't know where to turn with their thought, they wandered about with it, found peace for it nowhere.

At that a man got up among them.

It had never before happened in eternity that anyone had got up, that anyone had changed and become something different. They gazed at him, marvelling. His face was passionate as if it were burnt with fire, his eyes flamed in the darkness. He

didn't speak like the others, he spoke fiercely, his words coming vehemently one after the other:

What is truth? Tell us, what is truth?

This life that we live, it is only confusion, only riches without end. It is too much. It is too much, we cannot grasp it. We can only see the little that is our own, that which is too small. But all that is great is too great. We struggle and struggle each by himself, we seek and seek, but nobody finds anyone but himself. We sit alone in an endless space, our loneliness cries out in the darkness. We cannot be saved, there is too much of us. There is no way for us all to take.

Then is life always just one of us? Is it never all of us, something so certain that we can all lean our heads against it and be happy? Is it never simple and one and the same? Is it never simple like an old mother who says the same words to her children every day, but feels her love deeper and deeper every time? Is it never a home where we can all come together simply as one? Is it so great that we can never grasp it? Never, never in eternity! Only brood and brood each over what is his own, and see all the rest engulfed in a darkness where our minds can seize on nothing.

I cannot endure life's being so great! I cannot endure its having no bounds. I cannot endure my loneliness in a space which has no end.

I will seek god, seek what is always true.

We will seek god to call him to account for this

bewildering life. We will all gather together, and set out and seek god, to gain certainty at last.

They listened to him intent. He had spoken in a way that held them all. He had touched something in them all, something which each one now knew had lain hidden within himself also, and which hurt as soon as anyone touched it. They had not felt the misfortune of life so deeply before, some had not felt it at all. Now at last they became conscious of everything. Now they all understood what helpless confusion life meant, how it was so much and so great that it gave peace to none of them, not even to the happy, not even to the richest, that for mankind it was without foundations, without solid ground to stand on, without truth. Now they understood how degrading it was for them to live as they did, without knowing, without really being able to believe. Now they understood to what desperate loneliness they were each of them doomed, surrounded by impenetrable darkness. And they understood that it must come to an end, that they must go seeking for something else, for something that was valid for them all, for light and certainty, for truth.

But some thought: Is there really a god? One said: Is there really a god? I feel as if there isn't one for me. And another said: I too feel as if there isn't any god for me. The passionate one answered: One man cannot expect to have a god; but for us millions there must be one. When he had said this

they believed it and got up to follow him, and call god to account for this incomprehensible life.

They found it hard to get up. They had made themselves comfortable each in his own way for all eternity, it had never occurred to them to make a change. They got up with great effort and at first staggered a little in the darkness. But when they had gathered round him who was to lead them they stood firm and close together, like a body of men in which there burns a holy fire. They felt that amidst all the confusion and diversity there was at last something holding them together, their misfortune, their bottomless misery. They felt the depth of their despair, they felt how it united them, they made themselves drunk with it. They felt it as a vast power, as the vast power of man, which forced its way out of the depth of his struggling soul; they made themselves drunk with it. The happy could not conceive how they could have been happy. The unhappy regretted not having been more unhappy.

With the passionate one at their head they set off to call god to account for everything.

There were not many to begin with, not many by the standards of eternity. But on their way they gathered more and more, all the unnumbered who sat round about in the darkness. They came upon clumps of people who were deliberating one thing after another, one life after another, they came upon those who were quite silent, so that they were not noticed until you were standing amongst them.

They came upon the lonely who sat apart far off, cut off from everything. They gathered them all. They gathered happy and unhappy, rich and destitute, faithful and despairing, the strong and the weak, the submissive and the struggling, all who had lived. They all followed them. When it became clear to them what the great pilgrimage was for, that it was for salvation from life's dreadful confusion and from man's loneliness in his boundless space, then they all got up and silently joined the procession. The eyes of many burned with agitation and suffering, they united themselves in ecstasy with the others. Some drew themselves up slowly, in their faces there still shone the gleam of a secret joy; they joined the multitude gazing into the far distance. They all got up and followed.

At their head went the passionate one. He no longer spoke, he was only one of them, the one who led them on. But he carried his head high, he seemed a vast figure, fire lit up his features. In life he had been a shoemaker, sitting all the time; now he was gathering all the living to lead them to god. He had sat shut up in a little workshop that smelt of wax and leather, there he had suffered his own life, now he suffered the lives of all. They followed him as if he had been the misery they had known from the beginning of time. They saw themselves in him, their afflicted, shut-in soul, which when it got out of its prison found everything foreign and desolate and cold, which yearned back home again,

but no longer had a home, since it was no longer imprisoned, but homeless amongst all that is. And they thought, as the endless pilgrimage drew out longer, and as more and more multitudes gathered from all parts of the darkness, of how horrible life was, how horribly great, even greater than they had ever suspected. And they thought of god, of him who had laid on them this unimaginable burden and who would now save them, give certainty and peace, of how mighty he was, how all-embracing; and yet there burnt deep down in his great hungry soul a small flame that warmed him amidst his joyless riches, as a flickering candle warms the wanderer's hands at the end of all his wanderings in the empty desert where there are no more paths. That he would give them.

The multitudes grew and grew. They became immense. They became so immense that no thought could grasp them any longer. They surged like oceans whose coasts no one sees and no one guesses at. They seemed at last to stand still, great surging seas which felt only how everything was flowing in upon them, everything lonely and struggling, everything confused and abandoned, everything seeking and seeking again, everything that had been. They were drunk with the sense that everything was being gathered and gathered to them, until outside there would no longer be anything. It took hundreds of years, it took thousands of years, it was all so vast.

Now the masses murmured as never before with all that was in them; they stirred and seethed powerfully, heavily; they broke against each other; they piled up; they flowed from one to the other, levelling themselves out; rose in other places, sank again; then they became calmer and calmer, the outermost edge seemed to draw in a little, became fixed, no longer wavered, held firmly together like an iron band all that was within and received no more from the outside; out there was only empty nothing.

But now at last when all that lived had been gathered together, and had mingled with itself, like waves that mingle with each other when a struggling sea grows quiet and motionless, then gradually something strange happened, something which none of them had suspected. When it had grown quite quiet, they were seized with the sense of being one, not more than one. They felt that they belonged together, one thing fitted to the other, everything fitted together, it was a whole. And the whole was so simple that they stood gazing round staggered and bewildered. It was not complex, it was only great. It was not great, there was only much of it.

Everyone discovered his own kind. It wasn't hard, it came of itself. After a little seeking everyone found where he fitted in, where he had fellows; it all fell into place. Life seemed to be only a few kinds, but incredibly much of each kind; and when

these kinds had each sorted themselves out, they formed together only one kind, which meant just the same thing. The exceptionally unhappy found the others who had been exceptionally unhappy, those who, really, were happy found all the others who had really been happy, the believers found the believers, the doubters found the doubters, the struggling found the others who had struggled, the dreamers the others who had dreamed and yearned, the lovers those who had loved, the bitter scoffers those who had shut themselves up in bitter scoffing and contempt, the abandoned the others who had been abandoned, the magnanimous the magnanimous; and the bandits found the bandits, the great martyrs found the great martyrs, the heroes the heroes, the swindlers the swindlers, those who were nothing those who were nothing.

At first there was a murmuring confusion in these vast, surging masses, when everyone found his own home. Here swarmed hundreds of thousands who all looked just the same; you called to them: Who are you? They all replied with one voice: We are Mr. Pettersson, the grocer. Here swarmed an even more stupendous multitude; you shouted to them: Who are you? They all answered gloomily: We are those who have a black spot on their nail.

But when all had established themselves in their own place, the masses fitted together with no boundaries between them, making only a boundless whole, and it gradually grew strange and quiet all

round. Life didn't seem to be anything at all remarkable, only what it should be. Life seemed only to mean that they should all be and that they should fit together. It was a meaning so simple that there was nothing to be said about it, nothing.

There was no confusion. Everything was ordered and perfectly secure, exactly as it should be.

There was no loneliness: no one was so queer that there were not several millions just like him.

There was no point in any despair, any unrest and hopelessness: everything was in order. Everything was as it should be.

They stood bewildered. A deep satisfaction, a deep gladness and thankfulness filled them. They gazed round them with slow glances, everything was peaceful and quiet, everything was one. They thought of how they had distressed themselves, how they had fumbled and sought, how they had suffered and suffered, how they had tormented themselves with anxiety and doubt, how they had dug deeper and deeper into themselves and not found any bottom, how they had groped ahead in the darkness to find just one who was their brother, just one, just one; but it was too great and empty, all was too great, so vast that they could not grasp it. A deep gladness and satisfaction filled them now.

They were like a man who has struggled all night with the gale; when at last the morning comes and the sea suddenly lies motionless, without wind,

and daylight spreads out over the endless quiet, at first, lit up with happiness, he feels that he has saved his life and that all is serenity and light, but then when his eyes have searched the endless sea again and again, he is gripped by the desolation of all that lies motionless around him and by the desolation in his heart, where there is no longer peril and darkness, only certainty and security. So with them; they were gradually gripped by the desolation in what they saw, in what they had found to be the certain and the true. All was so simple and uniform. All was so light and perfectly comprehensible. All was just as they longed and longed all their lives for it to be. They had nothing to struggle for, nothing to suffer. Nothing.

They stood disheartened. They stood irresolute and didn't know what to do with themselves, which way to turn. What had been theirs no longer existed. No anguish filled them, nothing. No unrest drove them on. All was complete and ended, all was as it should be. They no longer had any reason to seek out god. They understood it all themselves, there was hardly anything to understand. It was only what it was.

A dull silence spread over them, it was gloomy and empty.

Then a man got up among them and spoke to them all in a hoarse but piercing voice, he was small and doubled-up, but he got bigger when he drew himself up; his face was fine and slender in shape,

and when he spoke it quivered with a fierce inner glow:

What then am I! What then am I!

This life which we struggle in and suffer, which weighs upon us like a darkness where we are lost, which we feel our way through by anxious thought, groping and groping ahead to find at last what the truth is for each of us, this then is nothing but an unchanging repetition through the ages. It is nothing but the same over and over again, nothing but one and the same continuously, the same poor, simple meaning, the same certainty, the same nothing. We struggle and struggle; and then it is nothing. We tear open our breast; and then there is nothing but a heart which will live and die, like thousands more before it, after it. We feel a holy fire burning within us great and mighty; and then it is only the fire that's required to keep us going, the warmth of our bed to save us from freezing, poor wretches, and come to an end.

So that's the reason for it all, only that we should not come to an end. That we should never come to an end, never come to an end. And when our evening is drawing in, we are brought back like great fat cows, who have each grazed its own bit of the sunny earth, and are driven together, each into its stall; and all that we leave behind us is the manure for next year's grass, our manure, as good from the one as from the other.

I am weighed down to the earth with shame.

I rise up in disgust and hatred. This life which is only an imposture, which is one long insult to all that I have felt holiest within me! This life which is so simple and small that it is humiliating to live!

No confusion, no sorrow. No misery, no bleeding wound. No quivering heart which never finds peace. Nothing. Everything that for us gave life its richness and pain, which filled us with anxiety and groping unrest, with yearning without end, that is nothing. All that is is something other than myself.

I was one alone, I was one in despair who never found peace. I was one without a home who went on seeking and never found. What am I now? Nothing. I am alone no more, I am nothing. No one is alone by himself, no one sets out alone on a road which has never been taken before, which is blotted out behind him. No one is alone with his heart bleeding to death, growing silent in a darkness where no one listens.

I am not alone, I never shall be again. All is empty, all is in vain.

If a man moves his hand out to the right, then slowly to his breast where he draws a cross, then up sideways into the air, that meaning nothing, then puts his finger to his lips, as if sealing them, draws an invisible circle above his head, and after that raises his finger and points towards a hidden star far off in space, which he cannot see, only feels is there; yet tens of thousands have done the same before him, even if only, as I now, in order to be

alone in something amidst life's emptiness and nothingness. It is horrible.

It is horrible. I rise up in flaming hate. I rise up burning with hate against him who insults my holiest possession. I seek god! We will seek out god to call him to account for the poverty of life. We will seek god to accuse him of life's insult to man, of its certainty, its one poor truth. We will seek god to demand of him the confusion and the doubt, the soul's longing that nothing can still, to demand of him his boundlessness, his anguish, his space without end.

They listened to him with rising excitement. His hatred infected them, they felt that within them too it lay fermenting, within them all, it grew stronger and stronger, it surged out over the illimitable multitudes, passed on by each of them. They saw his fine, quivering face, it was their face, a prayer for pain and throbbing unrest, for the soul's loneliness that nothing can redeem; they understood the brutality of life, its brutal gladness that wanted to rob them of everything. All around they began to cry: We will seek god. Further and further away they began to cry: We will seek god to call him to account for the certainty and serenity of life, to demand of him all the anguish, all the darkness, all the depths of the abyss, all that we cannot grasp. Then thousand-voiced, as if from vast struggling seas, there rose a great roar: We will seek god to call him to account for everything.

Slowly they began to move, the spiritual man at their head, he led them.

It was a strange journey. The immense multitudes, now greater than ever, rolled forward, spending all their strength. They rolled on so slowly and heavily that their emotion grew deeper and deeper, their souls were filled with a glowing, mystic faith in the greatness of what they were undertaking. They went on and on; they did not arrive. They went on and on, hundreds of years, thousands of years; they did not arrive. Then they thought how tremendous this was that they were doing. They thought how incredibly vast they were, how incredibly vast was their poverty, rolling away towards him who possessed everything. They thought of god, how he lay jealously brooding over his treasures, cruel, demoniac, leaving for the swarming life which he had created only a tiny scrap of his incomprehensible nature, a poor morsel of bread, a little gladness and peace, a little certainty and warmth-giving sun. They thought with mingled horror and exultant vengeance how they would soon stand face to face with him.

They did not arrive. The way to god seemed infinitely long. The spiritual man himself could not find it. All the noblest had to come to the front in order to try together to find the right way. They were dignified and serious men, but now, roused in their innermost being, they advanced with tight-shut mouths which betrayed nothing, though their

faces were flushed, over-wrought. They scanned and scanned the darkness around them. Behind them followed all the others, patiently waiting and waiting, sometimes stretching up to try to look over and ahead of them, then again merely following them, going on and on. All around them was nothing but desolation and emptiness. They did not arrive.

Then at last they saw far off a feeble light. It shone steadily, but so feebly that it could scarcely be distinguished amid all the darkness. They made for it. They thought, it is a sea of light, but far away from us. In the end, after many years more, they began to approach it.

It was a little lantern with dusty glasses, it cast a quiet light round it. Under it stood an old man sawing wood. They could see that it was god.

He was bent and short, but strongly built. His hands were rough like those of a man who has worked all his life long at one and the same thing and without resting. His face was furrowed, full of toil and a mild seriousness. He didn't notice them.

They came to a halt.

They stopped, struck with amazement before him. They stared and stared at him and could take nothing in. Those who were far off stood on tip-toe so that they too could see, a murmur went from man to man, a duller and duller murmur.

Right in front stood all the noblest of them, men with spiritual features, faces quivering with the soul's most secret life: their eyes blazed with holy indignation.

You are god? they began in a trembling voice. It is you who are god!

The old man looked up at them, confused. He made no reply, but moved his head in assent.

You stand there sawing wood! they said.

He made no reply. He wiped his mouth with the back of his rough hand, looking about him timidly.

We are the living, they said. We are the life which you have brought forth. We are all the living, who have struggled and struggled, who have suffered and suffered, who have doubted and believed, who have groped on through the darkness where nobody can find his way, who have sought and sought, known glimpses and yearning, who have reached out searching to the furthest point of our nature's uttermost limits, who have torn the heart out of our breast and cast it beyond the limit, to bleed to death in the nameless pains of loneliness.

What have you meant by us?

The old man stood perplexed and troubled. It was as if he had only now fully understood what it was about and who they were. He raised the frightened eyes of a recluse and gazed out over the surging sea of men who stood before him. His glance strayed about, there was no end to them.

Wherever he might look, there was no end. It was illimitable, man by man, millions and millions again; there was no end.

He returned to himself. He stood timid and awkward, not looking up. He put the saw aside. His clothes were old and worn, it was more noticeable now. He passed his hand through his lank, grey hair, let his arm sink again. When he didn't have his work it was as if he didn't know what to do with his hands.

I am a simple man, he began at last in a submissive voice.

We can see that, said the leaders. Yes, we can see that, said all the others, all the millions of millions, as far away as you could imagine them.

The old man got even more confused. He stood before them humble, weighed down by their words.

I didn't intend life as anything remarkable, he went on submissively as before.

A shudder passed through the leaders.

Nothing remarkable! Nothing remarkable! they burst out, their eyes blazing. It's horrible!

Nothing remarkable! sounded from the millions of millions. Listen, listen to that! Nothing remarkable! It's horrible! Horrible!

The old man seemed overwhelmed by them. He fumbled with his large hands. His old head was bent still more. You could see how he suffered and struggled. At last he seemed to collect himself, withdrawing completely into himself.

I have done the best I could, he said quietly.

There was something touching in his simple answer, in his inability to stand up against them; the leaders felt it, but they went on speaking just as sternly and severely:

You have hurled us down into pain and torment, you have hurled us down into anguish and agonizing unrest, into nameless abysses; you have let us suffer and suffer, you have let us sink under our burden, under our misery, dragging us on. You have vouchsafed us the intimation that in suffering our life became great and precious, precious to eternity and god. You have let us languish, despair, perish. Why, why?

The old man answered quietly:

I have done the best I could.

They went on:

You have given us sun and gladness, you have let us be drunk with the loveliness of life, with the loveliness of morning when the dew wets our feet and all the trees smell and all the flowers and all the hills; you have let us know the earth's happiness, that our home was there, that our home was the flowering earth; you have vouchsafed us the intimation that life was gladness only, only radiant light, only morning and morning again. Why, why?

He answered quietly:

I have done the best I could.

They went on:

You have not believed in the one, nor in the

other. You have just seen that in this way it would fit together, that in this way it would work. All you have wanted is that life should manage to keep going, and that it never need come to an end. All you have wanted is life, nothing more, only life over and over again to no purpose. Why, why?

He answered quietly:

I have done the best I could.

At this unchanging answer they were at a loss. Something submissive and touching in it, repeated like that by the old man, made them stand silent for a while and collect themselves before they could go on. But soon their passion burst forth again, strong, irresistible.

But what did you mean by it all then! You must have meant something! What did you intend by this that you set going, by all this unimaginable life! We must demand a complete understanding of everything, and also the confusion which is in everything. We must demand certainty about our radiant joy, about our right to light and happiness; and also the certainty that there is no joy. We must demand the deepest abysses of anguish, our suffering which nobody can grasp, our anguish. Our darkness where we languish and die, and also the certainty that there is no cause for anguish. We must demand coherence in everything, peace for our thought, for our tormented, struggling heart, and also we must demand that there shall be no coherence, no rest, no peace. We must demand everything.

The old man listened to them calmer than before. Outwardly he was not changed, and yet he seemed different, though just as humble as before.

I am a simple man, he said, looking at them. I have worked untiringly, I have stood by my work day after day for as long as I know. I have demanded nothing. Neither joy nor sorrow, neither faith nor doubt, nothing.

I only intended that you need never be content with nothing.

This sent a stab through the hearts of all the leaders. They met his calm glance, so unlike their own ardour. They looked at him, he seemed to them to grow; he became great, so great that they could scarcely grasp him any longer, and yet he was so near to them. They grew quite silent; something warm rose within them, something unknown and new, their eyes became moist, they couldn't speak.

But all the millions of millions, all those who stood behind them and who had not been able to catch the old man's words, among them the unrest continued as violent as before, even more violent. They somehow gathered that the old man was being stubborn, wouldn't come out with the truth, and all their bitterness welled up. They must get their way with the obstinate old man. But they noticed that the leaders no longer spoke for them. They had given up the struggle, they had abandoned them. They didn't care about their salvation, their distress. They would have to fight out the whole

struggle for themselves, although they had no other weapon than their bleeding breast.

Amongst them there stood an immense crowd of little children who had been playing and passing away the time as well as they could during the long journey, which they didn't know the meaning of; these they chose to plead the cause of this horrible life. These they brought up before god. And they all cried bitterly and sternly:

What did you intend by these, then? What did you intend by these innocent children?

The children at first stood ill at ease looking around them. They didn't know what they had to do, they didn't understand what they'd been told. They stood uncertain and looked at each other. Then they gathered round the old man. Two of the smallest went up to him and stretched out their arms; he sat down, they climbed up on to his knees. They looked into his big horny hand, they poked with their small forefingers in his beard, on his old mouth, they thought he was a nice old uncle and pressed against him so that he should put his arm round them.

Big tears welled up in the old man's eyes. He stroked their heads with careful, stiff fingers that trembled.

By them I meant nothing, he said so quietly that they could all hear. I was only happy then.

Everyone's eyes filled with tears. They stood looking at god with all the children round him,

every breast grew warm and full. The men tried to keep back what they felt, the women sobbed aloud; every mother among the unnumbered multitude saw that it was her child who was sitting on god's knee, whose head he patted, and she wept, but subdued, softly, from joy. It was quite quiet, only the weeping could be heard. They all stood and felt deeply and secretly their intimate oneness with god. They realized that he was like them, only deeper and more than them. They did not quite understand, only felt it all. A miracle had come upon them, they all felt who he was, the noble after he had spoken, the people of simple feeling, who 'couldn't afford to be noble, after what had happened with the children.

No one spoke any more. They had nothing they could say; and they were silent not from sadness, but because their hearts were too full. They were silent that they might feel and grasp everything. They were silent that there might be complete stillness. They went out of themselves in order to be with what had happened to them.

Gradually the weeping ceased. Gentleness and peace came over them, as it does after a shower in summer, when the earth lies damp in the sun, clearer and as if nearer than before. And they understood that their visit to god was fulfilled.

Yet for a while they remained, lingering with what had happened. Then at last they turned round in silence, beginning the journey back. Once

more they looked towards the old man, who remained there; then they raised their eyes to the darkness before them.

The children didn't want to part from god, they liked being with him. But he patted them on the cheek and told them to go with mother and father and trust them, and they did as he told them. He stood alone gazing after them, serious and happy. And he vanished from their sight, the feeble light was hidden away in the darkness.

Mankind went on and on once more. But the vast seas no longer surged in unrest, they had found peace. The hosts advanced slowly through the darkness. All hands were raised, all eyes open. Silent and thoughtful they advanced. What they had experienced with god was gathered together and fell into place for them. The secret was mingled with the manifest, then the secret sank down to the depths of their soul while what was manifest was spread transparent above it. Each thought of what was his, each one was alone with himself. But while they were thinking they felt their oneness with all the others, while they were by themselves they felt they were all among the others. Slowly and imperceptibly as they advanced together there collected within them, as if in different vessels, something that was the same for all. And they carried it proudly or humbly, they carried it in vessels of a noble form which made the bearers noble as well, or in one of those country pots of clay

in which the peasant women fetch water from up in the hills, when the wells down in the villages have dried up in summer; they carried their wealth, it was the same for all. They were all slowly filled with the same perfect inner certainty, faith and light.

Then they began to speak, each of what was his, but turning to the others that they might hear and believe. They spoke to each other as brothers, simply and quietly, one by one as something ripened and came to certainty within him. They spoke to each other as before, only more quietly than before. They no longer had so many words nor so great; they didn't give the whole of their inner selves, they gave only their faith, that which belonged to all. This they offered each other with opened hands.

There walked an old man, his head was aged, but he looked straight ahead, as if a long way still remained for him; he said:

I acknowledge you, dear life, as the one thing conceivable among all that is inconceivable.

And he walked among the others, holding silence, listening.

And century was added to century, millennium to millennium, age to age; they knew nothing of that. They only walked ahead, side by side.

Another said, far off from him:

I allow that life can be good and evil, I thank it for everything. I thank it for darkness and light,

for doubt and belief, for evening and morning. In me it is the one, in my brothers everything else.

Another, who had lived shut up in himself, but now walked in freedom as one among them all, said, and he found in this his strength and peace:

Any real life is disheartening because it gives only itself, because its limit is fixed and closed, because the clearer its limit the more it suggests what lies beyond and the immensity of it.

And yet I know, now that I have found peace, that only within narrow limits can man experience what is greatest.

Another said:

I am grateful for my unrest, which has given me peace. I am grateful for my anguish, which has shown me it is not myself.

The sea at rest need not hear the gale to know that it is vast and deep.

So they talked among themselves.

But one said:

The shepherd watched his flock up on the hill, while inside it began to bubble and boil with lava and destructive forces. He knew nothing of what was happening there, and so he was calm. He drove on the flock in the sun and rested with his staff on the ground while he looked about him.

Then in spite of everything when the catastrophe occurred he somehow understood that too. He spread out his arms in the air and shouted at the

top of his voice like a madman. That too he had within him.

Neither the one nor the other was wholly himself. But when later on he watched new flocks on new hills, which he knew just as little about, he rested his staff on the ground with a new sense of security while he looked around him in the sun and smiled.

They listened to him and felt the same as he, only thousandfold; it was something they all possessed in common.

And after a while another one among them began to speak. There was something fine in his voice, something humble:

Perhaps there is something other than us, perhaps there is something other than living. But of that I know nothing. It is not me. We sense everything but we exist in what is ourselves.

And one of them said:

If our existence had no basis we ourselves would have to lay the foundations of it. Fools and madmen would say that we were building on empty nothing. We men would only build and have faith. And the foundations would rest immovably on what we had built upon. For there is no nothing.

So they talked among themselves.

And they thought of god, of how he stood over there by the eternal light of his little lantern; and they were filled with security. They went on into the darkness. Behind them followed all the little

children, chattering and laughing, running round each other. They had invented new games to make the time go quickly, and now they played them together, while the grown-ups thought about everything.

Another said:

The wealth of life is boundless. The wealth of life is as great as we can grasp. Can we ask for more? When nevertheless we do ask for more, then all the incomprehensible exists as well, all that we cannot grasp. As soon as we are able to reach out our hands for something, as soon as we get the feeling that something is, immediately it is. Can we ask for more?

They were filled with gladness at these words. They walked in silence, all the gladness and wealth within them. They went on and on in the darkness without speaking, strong and free.

At last, humbly and quietly, one of them said:

It is mankind's duty to be happy.

And these words seemed to them to carry the whole of their faith. Simple as they were they moved them deeply. They advanced in silence, thinking, with a secret light in their faces.

But one of them said:

We are not happy in the way the poor and miserable ask to be. We are happy in the way that man is happy when he is occupied with living his life.

And again another:

One must take pains seriously over joy. A man should bury his grief in an ocean of light; and everyone will see that all the light is streaming from this one little grief, as if from a luminous gem, wrenched with toil out of the dark mountains.

So they thought, seriously, about their happiness.

But one whose voice was much more radiant than theirs then spoke:

A man who bore an almost crushing sorrow, and who struggled heroically with life but came near to being defeated by it, saw as he passed a house on the road a two-year-old child sitting in the sand and playing with a dog. The dog was only a puppy and waddled clumsily about on its big paws. It pushed its wrinkled muzzle into the child's back, he shrieked with delight each time, clapping his small hands in rapture. He sat waiting without looking round, and when the dog nudged him again his eyes shone in the sunlight. A little way off stood a young woman looking on, as happy as the child.

The man had to stop and smile, it looked so funny. But he smiled for their sake too, so that they should know that he thought they were happy. Then he continued on his way. What had happened had no connection with his struggle and his life, and he forgot it. But without his knowing it the trivial interruption still lingered within him, and when he gave himself up again to his sorrow and

went on thinking out his bitter struggle, he was smiling even while he thought.

Another said next:

It is a fact that a hunchback is born into the world every minute. It seems therefore that there exists in the race a definite need to be in part hunchbacked. At the time when I lived there were some who discovered this, and they understood through it the whole abysmal cruelty and misery of life, and they preached a deep despair to mankind as the one truth and greatness, the one salvation, the one thing that could raise them to something higher and nobler and bring them a bitter peace. Nevertheless, however fervently they taught their faith, there were none the more hunchbacks born into the world for that, only one a minute as before. And in despair even over that, they had at last to give up and try instead to be happy.

So they talked among themselves. Each found in the depths of his soul something to offer, something of light and goodness. And they listened to each other, together building up their faith.

The millions went on and on. They advanced, vast, unimaginable in the darkness; but no darkness existed for them. They began to approach the place where they had first gathered together and where now they must separate again. The time for leave-taking came upon them.

Then while the others kept silent the aged man again raised his whitened head and said, looking

before him as if a long way still remained for him:

I acknowledge you, dear life, as the one thing conceivable among all that is inconceivable.

After that no one said any more. What needed saying seemed to them to be said. Nothing was left but all the richness in them which their thought could not embrace; they hid it secretly within themselves. Without speaking they parted from each other to return each to his own place and go on living.

GUEST OF REALITY

GUEST OF REALITY

IN a small Swedish town there was, as everywhere, a railway restaurant just by the station. It was so near the line that smoke from the engines drifted across it and left soot on the front. The house would have been white otherwise, it seemed almost to have been meant for a sort of dream castle, a fairy palace; there were turrets and battlements everywhere, little balconies that you couldn't come out on, ornamentation and carving all over it, niches that should have held urns with flowers, any number of bare flagpoles on the roofs. But after all it was no more than a big desolate-looking house with soot on it from the smoke. Yet it was not deserted, you could even see something of a festive air about it; travellers went there for a glass of beer, had a meal there between trains, and in the evening the band played in the garden at the back. It was a castle that had been put to other uses or got shabby because the festival went on all the time, had neither beginning nor end and no climax; the lino in the dining-room was worn, the plush sofas were fallen in and shiny with all the people who'd sat on them, the floor in the third-class refreshment-room was worn into hollows with knots sticking up,

the chairs were rickety, and there were holes in the seats; it didn't much matter, it wasn't worth worrying about, the customers came just the same and in any case they'd have had to go away again immediately. They were no guests in a festive castle, but still they sat there for a while eating and drinking, while the trains waited for them, shunting up and down the line, until the bell on the platform rang and they went off. There was never any peace, it was always people in a hurry who had to get away. But the castle stayed there the whole time with all its turrets and battlements, its flagpoles and balconies, its empty niches, always just as queer and fairylike, always drawing people to it as if to celebrations.

On the upper floor of the house they had fitted up a flat where a family with many children was living. Perhaps they'd meant to put hotel rooms there, where travellers could stay the night, there'd have been room for several off the long dark corridor, but nothing had come of it and they'd only made two rooms and a kitchen, where the family had lived for many years. At first, when they came there newly married, the flat had been altogether too big, but then the children had been born and grown up, more and more of them, and so it had got too small. But they never thought about that, this was their home and you don't shift things like that, to their way of thinking. The rooms were small and didn't get enough light: the three narrow little

windows that they each had were set high up under the roof; it had been done for the sake of the outside, so as to make it look quaint. The furniture was old and hadn't much finish, you could see it hadn't been bought in the town. The marks left by the strokes of the plane could be felt under the brown paint of the big bed and on the settles where the children slept, the sort that pulled out wider at night and took up a good part of the floor. In the best room there was a big round table with a crocheted cloth, they ate there on Sundays, at other times in the kitchen. On one wall hung a picture representing Luther, on another an alphabet embroidered on canvas with a lot of flourishes and ornamentation in a glass frame. Above the chifonier was a little shelf with an old worn Bible on it, Arndt's Homilies, and two new Bibles which the biggest girls had had when they were confirmed, they were covered in writing-paper, fixed with sealing-wax inside. That's more or less how things were. Many-coloured home-made rag mats covered almost the whole of the floors so that it was quiet when you walked. It was nearly always quiet there, although there were so many of them.

Under the windows there was a ledge, and there the smallest children went. They sat hunched up like young birds and looked out. They each had a stool. It wasn't really their own, it had been passed on almost like a legacy from the older ones, they didn't need it any more. All children have stools,

you always find that. But these children had them so that they could sit up at the windows and look out. The trains were constantly going up and down, shunting on to different lines, the engines whistled, pushed the trucks off into the siding, the men ran along by the side and waved their arms. There was always plenty to look at. Sometimes when the wind was that way the smoke drifted across the windows, and if they were open you had to hurry up and shut them. Then you could tell how quiet it really was indoors, the noise outside only sounded like something a long way off. Still you could see it all just the same, the trains drawn up at the platform and then going off and disappearing, with the white plate on the last carriage, the engines shunting backwards and forwards just the same. On the window-sills there was a thin layer of soot that mother wiped off, but it kept coming.

You don't often find such quiet in the world as there was in this home. The father was home to meals and he used to come in for a little while between times if he could, he was on the railway, that was why he lived here. But the mother was there all the time seeing to everything that had to be done in the house, that kept her busy, there was always something to be done and she seldom got out. She was fair, with clear grey-blue eyes, and her thin hair parted on her forehead. People are fair in many ways, but she was one of those where it isn't just an outward matter but you feel that it's

for the sake of this very thing that the people themselves are, that they're able to be and live for it, nothing else would have been any good to them, given them enough support. People like that often seem fragile, as if it wouldn't take much to wipe them out. If a powerful hand brushed over the world a bit too roughly, they would be wiped out, would no-longer be there. And the world would wake up as if out of a good, pleasant dream and realize that everything was just the hardest reality. But these very people have a strange certainty and security, they go about quite unperturbed, not like pale shadows, but as if they were completely real. It's as though they were certain that they won't be wiped out, that they'll be there for ever, no harm will come to them. They seem to belong to an old race that has lived in every age, from the very first, although everything may have changed and been laid waste, they have always been saved from harm, they who were the very easiest to break. They have been and will be as long as life endures. And the world will never really wake up out of its dream.

She was one of those. She was nothing unusual or remarkable, went about the kitchen and the rooms doing her everyday jobs, chatted to the children, washed up after meals, did the washing and ironing, nothing out of the common. When she had nothing to do she darned stockings, mended clothes. Going about her jobs she was nearly always cheerful and used to like it if the big children had

a joke about something, something she could listen to, but if she settled herself down for a rest she clasped her hands in her lap and gave a deep sigh and seemed to be far away from them all. In the evening she sat and read the Bible or the Prayer Book, not aloud, but murmuring to herself. Then she would look pale and almost helpless over by the lamp, her small, thin lips trembling. But there was nothing special about her, nothing out of the ordinary. For people like her that's enough.

When the father came home at night he took off the jacket of his uniform, put out his signalling lantern and wiped it with waste, stood it outside in the passage, because it burnt whale oil and smelt after it was out. Then he would enter up truck numbers for a bit and mention which were to be loaded and emptied next day, and something about the trains he had to see about. But when they'd finished eating he got the Bible and read it. There was a strange heaviness when they both sat reading and no one spoke. The children kept quiet, it was so silent that they felt weighed down. Down below was the third-class refreshment-room, and from it came the noise and voices of people who were sitting there drinking. But that was something apart and outside them which they paid no attention to. Sometimes when a late train ran into the station the father went over to the window, stretched up and looked out, Bible in hand. Then he sat down again and went on reading.

The children were allowed to go out for a bit before bed-time, they crept along the dark corridor like a crew of mice, gradually raising their voices as they climbed downstairs. The spring evening shone and there was a smell as if it might have been raining. They crept through a little gate that led from the enclosed yard to the park. Then you heard the band, every kind of instrument drumming, piping and blaring, the flutes sounded out high and shrill, the trumpets struck in booming. The park was lit up further along.

They hurried in under the trees, darted among the trunks, crept as near as they dared. Right in front, there stood some old fir trees with branches sweeping down to the ground, it was quite dark there and they got inside, cautiously, had to mind not to get resin on their clothes. The space in front streamed with light, there were lots of people listening to the band, the best of them had red rugs round them. The waitresses went about among the guests and poured out strange drinks, you could only see their white blouses above the tables, they floated between them like doves. In the bandstand, which was like the half of a house, the regimental band was playing in gleaming uniforms. The roof above it was a sky with golden stars. The instruments gleamed, the sound rolled out into the still night, towards the end of a piece the big trumpet would have begun to drip.

The children stood breathless, their eyes moist

and bright, not daring to stir. It was just as strange, remote and wonderful every time, although they had grown up with it.

Then when dusk fell they crept back home and were in bed dreaming about queer things they didn't understand.

But in the morning an old can of freshly strained milk was put in through the kitchen door. It came on a train that got in at 7.15, and stood by the driver on the engine. The milk was still warm and smelt of the udder, the children drank all they could get. Under the lid a slip was stuck in, wet because the milk had splashed. It said how the spring sowing was getting on, and the cows, whether anything had happened, or usually that there was nothing in particular, they were all right and everything was going as it should.

It came from the farm in the country, their home was there, where they had come from.

The children were dashing about in the park. It was so big that it seemed really like a wood, though one that was kept trim and cared for. All the same in one corner it wasn't quite so tidy, the trees had sprung up all anyhow and the grass was left to grow just as it liked. That was where they liked to be. But they ran about almost everywhere. Over by the whitebeams that grew on the little hill close to the platform, in the abandoned fir grove with its heap of sardine tins and broken glass in the

middle, and by the ant-hill that stood a little way off where the quaking grass came right up to your knees as if the ants had manured it so as to hide their home from the world. And over at the other edge too, where the lilacs were in flower the whole way along the street that bounded the park on this side. They were neither just playing nor going for a walk, but something in between, sometimes they'd give a leap or chase each other among the bushes, then they would go along quietly listening to the birds chirping. It was a fine day, a wonderfully good day. A few wisps of cloud lay at rest in the sky as comfortable as could be, the sun came easily down, unhindered, and tended the growing things on the earth. You might well go about feeling content with everything as they did. The whole park really was their own now in the middle of the day. An old man was raking the paths somewhere so far away that you could hardly hear it where they were, and anyhow they knew him quite well, so it made no difference.

What about looking for lucky lilacs with five petals? That was a good idea. One of the girls was always finding these. As soon as she bent a branch down and began to search over a cluster she found several, even eights and tens. She was called Signe, and she comes in later. When she found a really big lucky one she felt uncomfortable because it was always her. Oh, I say . . . she said, because she didn't know whether the others had found some

too. Then she clapped her hands and gave a laugh, and ate it, you had to do that to make sure it worked.

Then they began playing properly. The biggest boy clapped one of the girls on the back and ran and stood ready behind a tree. This was the beginning of tag, or old man, whatever you like to call it. They whirled about among the chestnuts and maples, in between the elder bushes where the earth hadn't been raked up, so that it didn't matter much running about there. It went on all over the park, now they were here, now there, sweating and out of breath, they caught hold of a branch for a moment and rushed on, the girls had to stop sometimes and let themselves be caught, but when they'd got their breath they flew off again.

Right in the middle of it they came quite close to the restaurant garden. They mustn't go there, but they stopped, panting, at the end of the paths that led down to it, stood and watched, the game brought to a standstill. It was queer to see how altered and desolate it all was in the daytime. The tables were bare and soiled, sticky with beer and 'punsch' that had dried in and was smelling in the sun, all underneath them lay spent matches and chewed cigar stumps, in one place someone had been sick. The bandstand gaped empty and abandoned with the music rests shoved together like skeletons in one corner, bits of the sky and the stars had fallen down. There was nothing cheerful

or gay about any of it now, in the daytime they didn't care about it at all.

They set off again, took up the game where they'd stopped, the one who was 'it' drove the others in front of him like a flock of wild sheep which scattered into the bushes, the girls' shrieks sounded like signals of distress from behind the trees, the flock whirled about through the whole park, from one side to the other, yelling in the blaze of the sun.

But the smallest, whose name was Anders, didn't join in, that didn't matter much though, because anyhow he wasn't able to run as fast as the others yet. He stayed where he was, looking wonderingly at the desolation among the dining-tables, where at night everything had been so wonderfully lovely. Now it was like nothing, just grimy and laid waste. He couldn't take it in. He had thought it was all really true. The sky and the stars, the brilliant lights, the bandsmen who were like angels, and the music that sounded so lovely that sometimes you daren't really take it all in. He remembered it all so well. And now—nothing was left, nothing was recognizable. How could a thing like that disappear and be just empty and desolate afterwards?

He was frightened, felt so weighed down that his chest would scarcely breathe properly. And surely he was shivering as he stood here, even though he was in the sun?

Sadly he walked up the path, looking down the slope. He heard the cries of the others up in the park, but he didn't want to go to them. Dawdled about by himself, didn't know what to do. Then he sat down on the big broad path that ran through the middle of the park and was gravelled the best, on the others there was earth just below the gravel, because there hadn't been enough, perhaps. First he poured sand over his shoe and patted it down, and when he pulled his foot out it made a little cave, like you have for potatoes or anything, anything that has to be kept. He made quite a lot of them, but it didn't take long, because he was good at that. Then he set about digging a really big hole. Scraped away with his fingers, deeper and deeper down, the sand got wet and fine, the hole so small at last that there was hardly room for his hand in it. He was so absorbed that he neither saw nor heard, and didn't notice that the landlord was about and not far off. Not until he was standing right over him and the shadow of his round paunch had fallen across the workplace.

The landlord was a kind old man, but the children were very much in awe of him, for they thought he owned everything in their part of the world; he didn't really own very much, he was only hiring it on a ten-year lease that wasn't up yet. He shook his head and played with the watch-chain that lay in a wide curve over his waistcoat. No, that will never do, he said. And so as to be really

kind he added: When little children dig holes it means that someone in the house is going to die.

He'd have spoken straight out to the other children, but for one as small as this he thought he'd have to explain it somehow.

Anders started up white with terror. His face had gone quite stiff, he stared down into the hole, then he dropped down trembling on his knees and filled it up again.

The landlord thought there seemed something queer about him, and he took a bag of sweets out of his pocket, he liked children and he usually had some sweets for them. A sweet is always a sweet, and Anders with a trembling hand took a big, sticky one that was offered him. But when he'd said thank you he rushed away wildly, all among the bushes, across the lawns, up into the park.

Who was to die? Who was to die? Mother, perhaps? Himself, perhaps? No, he was too small, he couldn't die yet. But mother, she looked pale and sometimes said she felt tired.—It surely couldn't be one of the waitresses, they all looked so rosy and well. No, it would be mother, oh, if it were mother!

He fell down in the grass, got up and rushed on again.

No, it was father! Of course it was father! He did shunting—and he'd be knocked down! It was father it would be! He could see that now!

He dashed along. Where were the others? He couldn't be by himself, he must get to them! He

couldn't hear them anywhere. Ah yes, there they were over by the whitebeams. He scrambled up the slope, flung himself amongst them white and panting, right into the arms of Signe.

The others didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, only that he came running all of a sudden. Signe saw it at once, lifted him on to her arm.

What's the matter with you? she asked.

He didn't know what to say. There were some things you couldn't tell, he'd noticed, and it wouldn't be worth it either, only make it worse, you'd got to put up with it yourself as well as you could. But he clung tightly to her.

The other children were leaning on the fence and looking down on the siding. There was a sheer drop, part of the hill had been blown away to make room for new lines. Hi! shouted Helge, the bigger boy, there's father! They must all get a sight of him—yes, there he was standing on the footplate of the engine, holding on with one hand and waving to them with the other. Signe lifted up the smallest one as high as she could manage. Now their father jumped off and ran in under the buffers while the truck was still moving.—Anders stared down, hot with anxiety. They didn't see him, it took a long time. Signe felt his fingers digging into her neck.—At last he came out again, signalled to the driver, and the trucks ran in on their siding.

His sister put Anders down on the ground, he was shaking all over.

That was perfect, said the big boy, who was leaning far out over the fence, that's just where they ought to be. It's Johansson wants them for loading planks this afternoon.

Well, what are we going to do now? he went on, climbing down.

They stood discussing it for a while.

I was going home to help mother a bit, said Signe. And she took Anders' hand for him to come with her.

So the two of them left the others. They went down the lawn, past the skittle-alley that rumbled as if it were thundering. A fat man came out in his shirt-sleeves and puffed, a glass in his hand.

Hell, what marvellous weather! he said. Morning, my dears.

They went along in silence, as if there were nothing they could say to each other. Signe could feel that his hand was still trembling, but she didn't know why. They came down under the trees, almost up to the gate into the yard.

Then his sister stopped short.

You can have this lucky lilac, Anders, she said. And she felt for one that she had put away in the pocket of her pinafore. It was a bit crumpled and cake-crumbs had got in it, she blew on it to open it and get it clean.

No, but you ought to have it yourself, he said.

Oh, what does that matter? Just you take it. I'm always finding so many.

He put it in his mouth and went on in silence at her side, munching it up.

There was something special between Signe and her mother. You noticed that at once if you saw them together busy about the house, as they were every day. They seemed to have their life in common, a life that wasn't quite like the others, more important in some way. They seemed to be the heart that the others in their home listened for in order to know for certain that they existed. You could sit and listen to it in the kitchen, in the rooms, wherever they went about doing their everyday jobs, if they sat shelling peas out in the garden, if they were washing up, dusting, cleaning knives on Saturday afternoon. Among the whole family there was an intimacy that kept them together and separated them from the outside world, but that was nothing to the bond between these two. They made one, there was nothing to distinguish them, except that the one was not yet as old as the other. It had got to continue, not come to an end, that was why one was just a little girl and the other already a mother with many children, pale and worn, as one who had already lived most of her life. But now for a while they were both here at the same time and went about chatting to each other. Not that that made them solemn in any way, or out of the ordinary in their talk. No, it was never like that. Take to-day for instance, when they're doing

the washing in the kitchen. It's nothing out of the way, there's nothing unusual about it. They bustle round each other piling up wrung clothes, changing rinsing water, fetching the blue-bag, hanging stockings to dry out of the window, and now and again finding something to say, laughing a bit, then catching hold of the scrubbing-boards and both getting serious again at the same time.

Signe is a plump little thing with a comical, shrewd look. She is golden-haired, her head all fluffy, her eyes sparkling. Just now she's sweating. She makes the soapy water hiss as she rubs the clothes, holds her head a bit on one side as if to get extra strength. Her face is red from her zeal, all over her hair little beads from the steam are glinting.

Oh, I say, *mother*, she says, stopping short. Just look! How it's run!

Would you believe it? says her mother. I never saw such a thing. Let's only hope it hasn't gone on to the others. . . .

Oh yes, *mother*. It's gone all on to the *whites*. Dear, oh dear, oh dear, what are we to do?

Oh, Signe, *what* a nuisance! Won't it come out? No, oh no. Well, there's nothing for it but to try and boil it out. That's what we'll have to do.

Well, we do seem to be making a mess, I must say.

That's the way they talked, about anything that might happen. And they'd stand on their heads again over the washtubs, rinsing and wringing out.

The whole house lay silent and deserted, the sort of afternoon when it feels as if nothing will happen. Only up in the kitchen they worked for all they were worth at the washing. The sun went in and out on them, whenever the small clouds came and went up in the sky. The children were at school or away on their own.

But what's Anders doing with himself? asked her mother.

He'll be sitting at the window, said Signe, if there's no sign of him.

So he was. Sitting hunched up on the ledge and making drawings in the soot on the window-sills. When he'd finished with one he'd move over to the next, there was one to each little window and the fine soot lay thinly everywhere. He didn't seem to see the trains that came in at the platform. But he *felt* them, gliding and gliding, changing and changing without break. He didn't need to see. Only when one moved off on the narrow gauge track nearest the window he would lean out. It was much smaller than the others and looked so funny it made you laugh. It went off tooting and disappeared among the birches away to the right, puffing a bit of woolly white smoke up over the tops of the trees. He thought of it almost as his own train and waved to it a bit. Then he sat down again by his soot.

It seemed desolate and strange just now. The world seemed to have forgotten itself, didn't know

what it was like. You could feel it over the houses across the platform, over everything. It all seemed to have stopped, to be everywhere empty and extinct.—And he sat here drawing.

No, he didn't want to sit here any longer. Why shouldn't he go down into the yard and find something to play with. That would be best, that would make a change.

He climbed down and went across the room. Out in the corridor was the door into the kitchen. There he stopped, put his ear to it and listened. Mother and Signe were talking. What were they saying? You couldn't quite hear because they were scrubbing the clothes at the same time and the water was splashing in the tubs. It only sounded like a peaceful murmur. No, he wouldn't go in there. But he quite liked standing out here and listening a bit. Now mother said:

Signe, don't you think we might have a drop of coffee fairly soon? We've earned it now, haven't we?

Yes, mother, I should just say we had.

You get the pot ready, then. I'll finish the towels.

Pfuh, said Signe, it's fine to straighten up again. She gave a laugh. And then began rattling the rings on the stove.

He crept away, down the dark stairs and out into the yard. It was enclosed by long, low buildings. The sun was blazing down just now, but he

didn't seem to notice. The washing-up water was still standing in one of the gutters because of cork and lemon rind that had got into the grating. A bucket stood beside it with a bunch of withered carnations lying among coffee dregs and ashes. He went round the outhouses. On one side there were four doors to the closets. Away in the corner was a big pile of boxes full of empty beer-bottles, there was a smell from the dregs. From there he went over to the other side, but keeping wide of an unpainted shed that had been put up in the middle of the yard. He didn't want to think about it. It had no windows, only a black hole in the middle of one wall, when you put your hand on it it sent shivers all over your body. It was full of ice.—No, he'd rather go and have a look in the woodsheds. The doors of all three stood open to let the wood dry, it smelt of birch, as if he'd stuck his head into a copse. In the end one stood a little old man sawing wood. He had a big white beard, yellowed with snuff under his nose, and small, peering eyes. Apart from that you couldn't see much of him in the half-dark.

Hallo, nipper, he muttered. What are you up to?

Nothing, said the boy.

Yes, I can well believe it. But poor old Jonsson's sawing his wood. He's been doing that since he wasn't much bigger than you. From morning to night, day after day, until he's as old as he is now.

Look how old he is. And all this drudgery just so that people shan't freeze to death. How many would have frozen to death, do you think, if poor old Jonsson hadn't stood here sawing wood his whole life long. Yes, many a thousand. Your father and your mother and Signe and the landlord and all the chits of waitresses—the whole lot of them would have frozen to death winters ago. But who thinks of that. Has anybody come and thanked me because he isn't dead. Not a single one. They don't think it's anything to say thank you for. But one day poor old Jonsson will have had enough of it, he'll be too tired and old and sick of it to toil for them any longer. And then the whole lot will freeze to death. Serve them right, eh?

Anders just stood motionless and stared in at him.

Well, anyhow, that's what'll happen to them. For it's bitterly cold in this world if you haven't got fires, I can tell you that.

Well, well, he went on, don't take that to heart. Out into the sun with you, my boy, make sure you get warm while it's summer, then when it's winter we'll see what can be done. And he gave him quite a genial smile, strange to say.

The boy did as he told him, got out into the world and looked about him. There was really quite a lot of sun just now, the grass between the cobblestones shone freshly, and all along the gutter, where the crevices were richer, young dandelions

stuck up. It was peaceful as a Sunday. If only he could understand why he had to feel so oppressed! It was like having a weight on his chest. Perhaps he might creep up and listen at the kitchen door again? No, he'd rather be down here, it was a fine day, you ought to be out enjoying yourself in some way after all. How was he to set about it? He really did want to, went up to the big carriage entrance and stuck his head out. There you saw a sunny patch of gravel and then a hawthorn hedge, and above them summer clouds that never moved. But apart from that there was nothing, only air, and up in that it looked all empty, as it sometimes does. He drew his head in again.

Well, perhaps he'd rather climb up into the ice-shed? Perhaps that would be the best thing after all. Yes, that would be best, that's what he'd have to do.

He crawled up the plank that ran down steeply from the opening, gripped it fiercely so as not to fall off. He didn't dare to look up at the black hole, but kept his head down, crawled like a crab with his fingers round the edges of the plank. The cold that streamed out began to touch the back of his neck, then he got up to the opening. Jumped in as quick as he could, without looking.

Inside it was pitch dark. He groped his way in the wet sawdust, shivering all over with the cold. The lumps of ice were uneven, in some places more had been taken away and there were holes, in

others it had piled up. At the edges the ice stuck out bare and made your fingers stiff.

He crawled about inside, tense, felt how cold it was, how dark, how terrifying. His heart thumped—no, he wasn't cold, his temples throbbed as if he were feverish. It was terrible. It was like being buried, not knowing whether you were alive or dead. You shook with terror. . . .

Who was it going along in the yard, it sounded like father. . . . He crept up to the opening, looked cautiously out. Yes, it was father coming home. He wanted to call out to him, to go with him up to the kitchen, to hold his hand up the stairs, he didn't want to be here—no, it would be best to stay here, it would be best for his father to disappear into the porch, he stood looking after him, with his mouth open, but without calling out.

How cold it was, how deathly and terrifying! Always the same dark and icy cold. He crept further in, the cold seemed even worse there. His shoes sank into the wet sawdust, along the walls and up on the roof it was dripping with moisture. He stood still and seemed to let himself go rigid. Didn't move a hand, not a finger. Seemed rapt away.

Why—how long had he stood like this? He had gone numb. Was he frozen, perhaps? No, his head was on fire, his whole body. He was overwrought—he must get out to the opening, breathe some real air and look down into the yard. He

looked out, gasping, gripping tightly with his fingers, his head hardly above the edge, his eyes hot and frightened.

Just then his father came out again with a basket in his hand.

Father! he called, loudly it seemed to him, though he only gasped it out. It couldn't be heard down below. Father! he called again. Then his father looked up.

Why, hallo, son, what are you doing there? You come down! What have you been up to? We've been looking for you, don't you want to come along to grandmother's, I'm going there on the trolley.

To grandmother's! shouted the boy, waving his arms. Wait, I'm coming, I'm coming straight away! And he scrambled down the plank on all fours as quickly as he could.

Rushed to his father, clung hard on his arm.

Which trolley shall we have, he panted, is it the overseer's or Karlsson's, we're going now, at once, aren't we, what have you got in the basket, is it for grandmother, what is it, we're going straight away, aren't we . . .? he poured it all out without a break.

What's the matter? asked his father, looking at him. What have you been doing up there?

Nothing, he answered, looking down. I just stood in there for a bit. . . . Oh, I did want to come out with you. We are going straight away, aren't we?

Yes, come along! said his father, taking his hand. They went out through the gate, out on to the gravel patch, into the sun. The child's breath came quickly, then more and more calmly. He looked about, up into the sky, down at the gravel which lay blazing yellow and freshly raked in the sun, at the hawthorn hedge which was almost white with bloom. Then, when they'd got a little way, he looked up inquiringly at his father, gave a pull at his arm.

Won't it be fine going out on the trolley? he said, with a rather shamefaced laugh.

Why, yes, so it will, said his father. Then when they'd gone a few steps further, he gave a jump into the air. Ran ahead and opened the gate that led to the platform, ran down the steps to it, and then up again to fetch his father and have some company, out on to the line to walk on the rails, ran up and down, now in front, now behind.

You seem in fine form, said his father.

Yes, I think it's such lovely weather. Isn't it, father? See how I can run on the rails!

Mind you don't fall! his father called after him. Of course he didn't. In a moment or two he was back again.

Where's our trolley, father?

Oh, we'll find it all right, it's standing over by the goods.

And soon they came to the goods shed. There the whole tackle stood on end against the wall, a

threewheeler and a big pole to push along with, that was all, nothing out of the way. At first they had to be content to walk behind and push, only the basket rode.

Shan't we get going soon? Anders asked.

Yes, as soon as we get past the points, said his father.

Anders ran ahead and made sure they were set right, so that the trolley shouldn't get upset with grandmother's coffee and sugar and the bit of yeast that lay on top. Lifted the wheels if they got stuck. In his free moments jumped about at the side of the trolley.

Here all along the railway yard ran the town cemetery, with graves coming right up to the line. He didn't think about that, just looked the other way instead. It was rather a long way, the graveyard stretched out right to the end. But he had the basket and the trolley to see to, and the piles of planks at the other side to look at. And then he could talk to father too, it didn't take long. Now he knew that they'd come to where there were no more graves, only a few newly planted lime trees on a lawn, that was for those who were going to die, who were still alive. He pressed close against his father.

Shan't we get going soon? he whispered.

Yes, just you wait a little while, son.

Soon after, out by the gates, they got going. Anders sat tight, holding the basket, his legs stretched

out towards the little wheel. His father stood on the broad side between the two wheels and worked the pole.

They soon got up speed. They were far beyond the town in no time. The pole gave firm, even thrusts at the gravel, the wheels flew round as fast as they could go, over the joints they made a click like a real train. Although it was a still day, the wind went past them so fast that they had to pull their caps well down over their ears.

Holding tight? his father shouted to him, crouching down for speed.

Yes! he shouted back, looking up and laughing.

First there was a straight run through meadow land. The flowers rushed past like little dots, you couldn't see what they were, the smell from them all was thrown up against the embankment. Then they ran into the wood. A strong smell from the firs was drawn past them and a smell of birches, light and fine, but still quite easy to tell, and of junipers and alders and pines, it was a mixed wood, a bit of everything. Then came a little of the wild-strawberry smell, because they went past a patch high up on the embankment, they shone so red that you could see them for a long time, but past you went, you just went past everything. Down on the slope there were all sorts of flowers, marguerites, crow's-foot, buttercups, love-in-idleness, little tufts of clover which had strayed there, wild oats, raspberry canes, and lots besides. They all smelt and flashed

out and rushed past, the firs, the birches, and the juniper bushes down in the wood as well. The telegraph poles fled backwards as if they were running home, didn't want to come with them.

Anders sat with wide-open eyes, devouring everything, his cheeks were a little white with the rush of wind, but the excitement and rapture made him hot, his heart leapt and thumped. He seemed to be in ecstasy. His father rocked himself backwards and forwards to get the proper swing. He had to take care that the pole didn't go on the sleepers, otherwise it slipped, but things like that he did from pure habit, the speed got better and better.

Here the line curves to avoid the water. Here there's water on every side, lakes, rivers, streams, and ponds. Every now and again they came to a bit of bridge, where some stream had to go under. Then his father would give a really strong push, there was a roar and they were over.

Mind you don't lose your cap! he shouted down at the boy.

All right! Anders shouted back, holding on to the cap, the basket and everything. They went like the wind.

Now they passed the watchman's place at Näset, the children looked out in wonder between the lilacs, biting at their pinafores and curtsying. Soon they came to the big bridge over the river, there they had to pole themselves along on the

sleepers with the broad current rushing under them. And then they had got to Näs station.

There they slackened speed a trifle, but not very much, because it was a small station with only one loop. The station-master was taking a walk along his station. He saluted just as if it were a real train, one that didn't stop at such small stations.

Then they got up their old speed again. It led past ploughed fields and clover fields, open land that belonged to a bigger farm and wasn't looked after very well, then into the wood again. It was a leafy wood that stood shining in the sun on both sides, full of the chatter of birds. Here eight men were at work on the line, changing sleepers that had rotted. They had a moment's rest while the trolley swished past. There had to be salutes in spite of the hurry, but Anders couldn't risk taking his cap off. He had to salute like his father, but with his head cocked on one side so that he could still hold the basket.

After that there was an incline, but they scarcely noticed it at their speed. When you've got up it the line makes a slope down right across the country, they call it the Street, and there you go for nothing, just flying along. Right on the crown of the rise was another watchman's place. The watchman was squatting against the chimney in the heat of the sun, tarring his roof.

Hallo, what's the idea—an extra train? he shouted down to them.

That's all right, it's just us! yelled father into

the wind, and by then they were already on their wild rush down.

His father pulled in the pole, keeping it ready to put a brake on the wheel with if need be. The wind whistled past their ears. The little wheel at Anders' feet flew round so that you couldn't see the spokes, it leapt and skipped with joy. It was like a colt in the morning when it's first let out. The line ran on like a streak. Marguerites, buttercups, cowslips made single streaks as well, the straight line of the telegraph wires glinted in the sun, the sparrows on them darted in terror into the wood, where trees and bushes grew together into a smooth wall, a squirrel, frightened out of its wits, ran along the top of the fence as if it couldn't get inside.

The whole thing was over in a few minutes, the whole long hill. Then the country opened out, on every side, with marshes, little lakes, ditches and streams, with tilled plots, open pasture, countless strips of ploughed land, with meadows, bogs and woods and farms scattered about amongst the oats and the rye out in the sun. It spread out so light and friendly that everything could be seen, and far off you could make out grandfather's farm among its maples. They slackened speed. They rolled gently over a wide stream with rushes and water-lily leaves at the edges, and shoals of bleak that leapt in the glitter. So they came to a rough village road that crossed the railway, there they slowed up and jumped off, they'd got there.

We tore along, didn't we? laughed the child, and ran round flinging his arms about. His father smiled contentedly, pulled the trolley down into the grass on the slope. Then they went through the gate and set off across country with the basket between them.

Anders was so elated that he could hardly make his legs walk properly. His father was in high spirits too and his walk was as easy as a young man of twenty's. To brighten him up still more the boy pulled at the basket now and then, then they both laughed at being out and walking together like this.

There was something strange about his father. It was as if he really were made for being glad. But it seldom came out, only when he was like this sometimes, he had something within him that was too heavy. He couldn't free himself from it and almost always went about serious and at times as if he were oppressed. He had worries, but it wasn't because of those. It was just that he was like that, he held back the light-hearted part of his nature as if it had been something wrong. His cheerfulness seemed to be quelled by his seriousness.

But now they were both of them gay and lively. The familiar fields lay on either side with all the growth in its summer fullness. Dust was rising from the rye and the air shimmered above the grey fences because of the heat. Their road ran a little way from the stream, they passed the mill and the miller stepped out big and mealy, just in time to

exchange a word with them. Then they crossed a brook and after that went up a low hill, then they had the farm lying right below them.

It was high, with narrow gables, the red paint had almost worn off, and the grey planking showed through. The maples grew up over the roof, which was of turf, fine and old and covered with quaking grass. The cowshed lay on the other side of the road and looked old, except at the end where it had been added to.

They hurried as fast as they could, watching to see whether perhaps someone was waving with the curtain. They couldn't see that, but a calf came scuttling along wildly to meet them, stretched its crumpled neck over the fence, sucked their fingers, and lowed. And just then the curtain began to stir. But now they'd got there, walked up through the garden.

It was full of apple trees, pear trees, lilacs and, right at the end, big flower-beds, peonies, button dahlias, clear-coloured marigolds, tall hollyhocks, geraniums that had been put out of doors for the summer, stocks, lavender, and mignonette that smelt a long way off. A low hedge ran along the path, Anders went on tiptoe to see over it into the currant bushes. But grandmother was standing on the steps of the porch, all amongst her flowers.

Well, children, so it's you, she said.

She was so old that she called them both children. Anders knew nothing so extraordinarily

old. Her face was thin and worn, not wrinkled and yet full of furrows, her body short and strong, in a skirt that was as grey and dry as earth. And yet she was quite like mother. Her eyes were the same, her hair just as fine, only hers was white. There was the same sensitive light about her, although she looked so dry with age. She took their hands, thanked them for all the coffee and sugar, which the boy had to show her straightaway. She pushed them ahead of her through the door and followed in stockinged feet.

Inside there was a strange smell of old wood and earth and dried manure which clung to the clogs in the porch. And from an upstairs room there came the smell of onions that were spread out on yellowed paper.

They lifted the latch and stepped into the big living-room.

It seemed almost in darkness there when you came in from outside. Two big beds with skin rugs over them and a big table in the middle, that was the main part of the furniture, by the window stood a loom with linen for sheets on it. In the open fireplace an enormous copper kettle hung, for they cooked potatoes for the pigs. There his grandfather sat, looking after the fire. He was a strong man, although aged. He had a broad, large face, clean-shaven, the mouth set and without teeth. His hair fell down on his shoulders, long and white. He was dressed in moleskin trousers and a leather jacket

with lead buttons. He didn't move, for his legs were stiff with age, waited for them to come to him.

How are you, grandfather? said his father.

God be praised, said the old man in a loud voice, for he was hard of hearing himself, I've nothing to complain of. How are you getting on in the town?

All right, thanks. We're all keeping well, answered his father loudly and distinctly.

And you, my little one, have you come such a long way with father. The old man lifted the boy on to his knee and fondled him a little with his big-veined hand. Anders always thought it was queer to be sitting here like this with his grandfather, looked at his heavy face, held on tight to the jacket, everywhere he was quite stiff to touch.

Father and the old man sat a long while talking together, loudly and slowly, so that the cottage echoed. There were one or two things his grandfather wanted to hear about. They spoke with the same seriousness about everything. If they touched on good news they still spoke seriously, as if it weighed on them. His father was altered. He sat with his hands clasped, his back bent a little, looking older, just as he did when he read the Scriptures at home in the evening. The smell from the potatoes spread out over the room, the windows got steamy.

His grandmother stole backwards and forwards between the kitchen and the small room. She could

never rest, must always be doing and always had work enough to do. But she went in stockinged feet and you didn't hear her.

Now she came and tried the potatoes. They weren't done yet.

But, Anders, why don't you go out to the currant bushes? she said.

And he woke up, realized that it couldn't be right for him to be sitting here when they were so old, climbed down, and crept cautiously out.

At first he was nearly blinded with all the flowers, especially with the peonies that were burning fiery red everywhere. The sun fell on the wall, and there the flowers stood wide open for bumble-bees and honey-bees that were crawling in and out, for gorgeous butterflies that just touched lightly on them, as if they lived on scent. He crept down among the currant bushes. The earth under them was warm and fine, the hens had been scratching there, hollowed out nests as if to lay eggs in, plucked out small feathers. He pushed aside the dry little droppings and sat down in a hole that was just the right size, thrust his arm up into the bushes and ate. The clusters hung all round. Some were bigger and sourer because they'd been in the shade, others out in the sun were small and sweet, in that way you could have a change, according to what you felt like. He considered carefully before he chose, because he meant to go on eating for a long time.

No one could see him or hear him where he crouched. And there was no one there who might have seen him either, no one in the garden and no people on the road, it was peaceful and calm. Only a long way out on the marshes by the stream a cow bellowed now and again, and a few flies buzzed under the next currant bush. That was all. There was no wind, the maples were asleep in the sun, even the aspen, which should always be moving, stood still a little way behind him by the south gable. Now and then, so as to have a rest, he pushed aside a branch of his bush and looked up at the sky between the clusters and perhaps at a cloud that had stopped, that couldn't get any further to-day.

But just when he'd eaten as much as he wanted, his grandmother came out on to the porch steps on her way with the potatoes to her pigs. She was looking about and listening for him, he could see, not that that was much good.

Where have you got to, child? she called. Don't you want to come and feed the pigs? But he crawled along noiselessly under the bushes, and jumped out on her near the gate instead and frightened her a bit. If it had been dark, of course, she'd have been really afraid, but it wasn't. They went on down to the cowshed.

The sow lay heaving in the sty with the little pigs at all her dugs. She hung down into the muck even when she got up, but from out of her fat she

gave grunts of pleasure, the little pigs rolled off her in every direction. She slobbered up the whole troughful at a stretch, the little ones tried to get at it too, but they weren't big enough to reach it yet. Then he and grandmother went on and saw to things in the cowshed. There was mucking out the oxen, and then a cow that had been brought in because it was going to calve. The hatchies out to the dung-heap had to be opened. There was none too much manure in the summer when it all went to waste out in the pastures, there was hardly more than a puddle that the sun shone down into. The cow that was in calf turned heavily in the stall and lowed, looking out through the opening. Now a hen let out a screech from up in the loft.

She's laid, I expect, said the old woman. Go and look for it, Anders! And he climbed up the ladder.

He stayed up there in the dark awhile, tumbling in the hay that smelt so good. It was newly brought in, loose, you fell about everywhere. It was dark here, but of course that didn't matter. The only light came in through a hole. He went and looked out through it for a bit, his legs hanging and dangling a little. He found the egg, and another one in a different nest.

Those can be for mother, said grandmother.

It was good to be going about with her, seeing to things and now and again chatting a bit. She was grave and wise, but so kind that you didn't

didn't really know—he felt it was hard and strange that he should have to come out here, it often made him suffer. But of course it had to be hard. It must be.

There was a way set for him. He had a world to himself and lived in it, a narrow world with ideas and precepts that must not be violated, never questioned, it was like being in a sort of cellar in broad daylight, he groped his way. Nothing could be done about it. It *was* so.

His cheeks burned more and more. He lay with his hands clasped tight. But he had only a single prayer:

Let him not die, let none of them die, for certain, not one. Let father live, let mother, let his brothers and sisters—he went over them—the old people in the country, all of them, all! Let not one possibly die. Let everything be as it was. Let nothing be changed!

His whole passion for life was bent on its not coming to an end. He asked no boon beyond that. Only to live. Apart from that, things might go as they would. It didn't matter. It couldn't be helped.

Yes, he really insisted that apart from that things might go as they would, so as really to show how little *that* mattered. In that way surely he'd be more certain of getting what he did ask for, that which alone mattered. He half shut his eyes, *thought* hard of everything he said, so that he actually *saw* it, it was as though he held it out. Prayed and prayed

that all might be as it was, that it should never come to an end. That it should be winter now, that it should be summer again next summer, that it should continue, continue—and that he and all of them should be there amongst it.

He worked himself up into an ecstasy, more and more fervent and intense, till it had full possession of him. It sounded inside him like an anthem to life, a strange anthem which never grew into an exultant song, which only counted everything up, only held despairingly fast to everything. But still it seemed an anthem.

In the space in front of him the rain was drizzling down, falling into the greyish yellow moss and on to the tree that he was staring at. But it was quite silent in here, as dark as if it were evening already. In its own way it was solemn lying there and praying on the stone in the half-dark. He didn't stir, not even his mouth. Only his burning cheeks, and his fingers clenched as hard as he was able.

After the prayer he got up quickly. Relieved, as if he were glad it was over, he rubbed his knees where they had got wet.

Jumped across on to a tussock, and then to another. He was on well-known ground here, but it was really wet to-day. Anyhow, on the tussocks it wasn't too bad. The fir branches hung drenched with rain that stood in drops amongst the needles, the alders stood with slender glistening branches, there were still leaves on the low birches in this

sheltered place, they made the trees into big yellow fires and lay burning amongst the heather and moss as well.

How fine it was to be alive, just alive a little, for a short time. He wouldn't die now at once, not to-day, not even to-morrow. No, not now when he'd just finished praying that he should be allowed to live. The birches and the red whortleberry clumps, the delicate heather bells all met him with, Well, my child, so here you are going about and living. And what are you up to to-day?

He hopped about on the tussocks like a young bird. Looked up into the trees, thought he heard something, squirrels, perhaps? Shook a fir branch and let it pour down on the whortleberry clumps, spared a little of the downpour for some cloudberries which he would be gathering another time. Then he clambered up on to the embankment again.

He went more briskly now. The drops on the telegraph wires were running in the same direction, homeward bound as well. He looked around, up at the tree-tops and the clouds all round. The weather had cleared up quite a lot, stockdoves cooed in the wood, other birds broke into twittering.

He stretched out his hand. Perhaps it was still raining after all? No, it wasn't. The sky stretched away, broken and sparse, as though if it liked it could open itself out. Sparrows came out on to the wires, sat and shook the rain off themselves.

Yes, the world was all anyhow. This way or

that way, there was no knowing. It was just as chance would have it. It wasn't worth wishing anything in particular for it, that was clear. So long as you had a chance to exist, a chance to be about. And he still had that after all.

He kept on. Came out into the fringes of the wood, where there were two cellars which the ironmongers from the town kept gunpowder and dynamite in, thought what a crash there'd be if they went up. Came out into the open fields, it wasn't quite such a wind now, from the embankment you could see clearly in every direction. Came to the sheds and into the station. A little scattered shunting was going on, the engines whistled and puffed out their smoke, the two narrow-gauge engines piped thinly like young birds, spat and hissed in their cylinders as they fetched up the coaches for the evening trains, the proper big one on the wide track flung its smoke into the sky in dignified clouds. Station men leaned out from vans and timber trucks as they ran free, waved and signalled with their arms. One engine had five open trucks of whortleberries behind it, one came panting with a long line of lowing cattle trucks. It was a lively place right enough. He picked his way amongst the trains, crossed the tracks according to the lines they took, said hallo to firemen and drivers, station men and the brake boys with lanterns on their way to the trains. Thought of one thing and another, felt really bucked up. . . .

What had set him off on all that? All that about dying.—He wasn't going to die! No more than anyone else. Not till later on, and that was the same for them all. Might leave that to look after itself.

He'd got over it for the time being, his heart felt light, he was back again amongst the others. People were walking up and down the platform with cases in their hands. Old women came rushing along, thought they were going to miss it. Olsson in the luggage van rang the first bell, Karlsson ran the luggage out, shouted to people who were in the way, the fireman lit the lamps on the front of the engine for the journey out into the world.

He climbed up the steps of the restaurant opposite, back home again. From the third-class refreshment-room came the shouts of two drunks whom the train was going to leave behind. But inside the yard between the woodsheds it was already quiet. He crept upstairs, along the dark passage. Outside the kitchen door he stopped and listened a little while—no, there were none of them sitting and whispering. He hung up his jacket out here in the dark, because it had got wet, and crept in.

There was mother, she was getting supper ready. They chatted a bit. He could see that she thought he'd been up in the park for a while. For his part he was cheerful and bright, talked about the sailors that morning and Gustav's last shy before the skittle-alley was shut up for the year. His mother

went about within the light she always spread around her, calm and peaceful. To him she seemed grave.

Then his father and the rest of them came in and they had their meal. The lamp was lit in the room and father and mother sat at the table reading the word of God, while his sisters made the beds, quietly, whispering, you scarcely heard them. He sat hunched up at the windows, it began to rain again, beat against the panes from the darkness outside. The last trains whistled and went off, the glow of their furnaces in the sky. But here indoors it was quite silent and still. Only his mother sighed at times and her lips trembled as she read. It oppressed you, it was as though she needed help, as though she were alone.

How everything weighed down on them here at home.

One morning the milk can didn't come alone. Grandmother got off the train with it in her hand, dressed for Sunday, in her old, fine kerchief. She stepped over the rails, looking about her carefully, and went up to the restaurant, where the waitresses were lolling at the windows, looking for guests. She curtsied to those she met. She seemed almost smaller here in the town. Her dress was black, but the folds were grey, with age, not with having been worn. The skirt reached down over her feet, so that they were hidden, and it was so stiff that it hardly

moved as she walked. The black silk kerchief was a wedding present, it had roses stamped into the material. It was so large that she was almost lost in it, the fringe fell down over her shoulders, her old firm chin stuck out over the knot. Instead of a coat she had a brown shawl wound round her and tied at the back. It was winter-time, frosty and clear, slippery underfoot. She walked easily for her age, only a little stiffly because of the shawl. Looked up at the turrets and battlements of the house, the snowed-up niches and balconies—no one could be seen at the small windows above the third class. No, she was not expected. By the gate a drift had gathered during the night, she had to step over it. In the courtyard, which smelt of beer, she curtsied to the landlord and young Gustav, who was shovelling snow away, went into the passage and up to the family. When she knocked on the kitchen door the youngest children came and opened it. They were washing themselves, just going to school. Mother was there cooking porridge. No, no one knew at all that she was coming.

God bless you, my dears, she said, and sat down, a bit tired. I've come with the milk. Why, that's just right, I see you're going to have porridge.

Mother helped her off with her shawl. The old woman seemed small in the chair, the flannel bodice lay drawn in and wrinkled against her breasts. She took the kerchief off too, the fine white hair shone, and the kind eyes—eyes that were sunk

deep in, as they are in old people. Well, everyone at home wanted to be remembered. They were getting on well, thank God. Uncle Emil had a lot of wood-carting with the oxen to do, he was hard at it, poor boy. It's slow work without a horse. Grandfather was keeping all right. And the cows were yielding well, there was still plenty of feed. Yes, God was very good to them all. Now next week they were going to kill the pig. Ah, of course, they'd said that in the letter with the milk the day before yesterday.

But why had grandmother come in to town like that without letting them know?

Well, they'd thought she'd better come in. She'd been against it, she didn't think there was any need for it. It was just that she hadn't felt quite well lately, nothing to speak of, but still they thought perhaps she ought to see what the doctor said. It was they who wanted it, not that there was any need for it.

Mother sat down beside her and took her hand, they all grew quiet. They all looked at her. She seemed the same as usual. Well, perhaps bent a little more. And her face was thin, perhaps. But then it always had been. It was extraordinary how deep her eyes were sunk in. But then they often were in old people. Yes, she seemed the same as usual.

But mother patted her hand, asked what was the matter, where the trouble was.

Why, it was only just that she didn't feel quite well and got tired at her work, so that she couldn't get on with it. But she hadn't any pains, nothing to speak of, well, perhaps a little ache. No, it was nothing. But it was the ones at home who wanted it. And perhaps she could have some medicine so that she could get along all right with her work again.

She folded her hands and looked at them, looked to see how they were, smiled at them a little, though not like she used, perhaps. Mother was grave as she sat beside her, didn't take her eyes off her. They were like two sisters they were so much alike. It was the paleness and the fine hair, the features which had the same sensitiveness and calm. They were so much alike in build too, wiry and short. Mother stroked the old woman's hand a little, she wouldn't care to show more because of the children standing round. They'd got to remember that grandmother was old, she said, she'd soon be seventy-eight, things couldn't be the same as before. Yes, now they'd go up to the doctor together, as soon as he was open, that's what they'd do. And then grandmother would soon be right enough again.

It's in God's hand, said the old woman.

The children stared at them, silent and wondering—it was extraordinary how grave mother was. Anders stood furthest off, his face white, gazing at his grandmother as if he wanted to see right

through her. They didn't talk any more, the girls looked for something to do out in the kitchen, put out the plates and porridge for the two youngest, who'd got to get off. Anders had to come up to the table and eat, he couldn't get anything down. Said good-bye as soon as he could and crept out through the door with a long look at the old woman.

He and his sister ploughed along through the snow on their way to school. It was frosty and unnaturally quiet, the town was deserted, there were no footprints leading from the steps of the porches, it was as if no one lived in the houses. They walked one behind the other without saying anything.

The bell began to ring in the tower—Anders gave a start—were they going to ring the church bells? No, it was only striking half-past.

They could hear children in the other streets, they came tearing along in twos and threes, yelling and shoving. Down on the church piece they found their slides again under the snow, took a run and went off in a long string, fell down and got up again. Anders and his sister kept behind, did short little slides without taking a run, as if they didn't belong with the others to-day.

There were two lessons before they stopped for lunch. Anders sat trying to follow the words that were read, to hang on to them and not be alone, to be among the others. But he couldn't lose himself in it. While he listened intently, made

himself hear how it went, *thought* how he was sitting here and listening—still he was miles away from it all.

What were they talking about—it just struck the walls, from one side to the other, and meant nothing at all.

And then they talked about God—here, too, here and at home, everywhere! Who was he? What was the point of all this talk? Did they suppose it helped!

No, he'd no use for God. It wasn't the same as before. And he never had seen much in him really—he didn't come into this.

No, if he could run out into the wood, if he could get off for an hour and run out there as hard as he could, rush off before it was too late, run, run, so that he got there completely exhausted, panting and feverish, and then fell across the stone. . . .

If he could get off, say he *must*, say there was something more important than anything, that he'd got to tear off . . . !

No, no one would understand. What could he say? That he'd got to run out into the wood! Who would understand that he had to? That you must beg and pray on your knees, fervently, really fervently, on a stone . . . pray that they might live . . . !

He worked himself up, didn't know what was going on around him. Didn't notice they'd had a break, come in again, got another teacher; they seemed now to be talking about something else. . . .

Yes, they talked about so much. It was as if they didn't realize that only one thing mattered. They were always thinking of something else. Not that they were going to die, that they were going to die. . . .

Then the bell went and they were let out, fought and shouted in the corridor. In the playground they threw snowballs at each other's heads, the last ones before lunch.

Anders and his sister went home silently. They didn't know whether to hurry or go very slowly. Towards the end they almost ran.

But grandmother wasn't back from the doctor yet. There were only their brothers and sisters, sitting waiting.

Anders climbed up by the windows, sat down and watched, crouched, as if to spring. His heart thumped, his eyes were hot as if he were feverish.

Then they came walking along, mother and grandmother up the path, calmly and quietly. They were both like old women, both in kerchiefs, but mother wearing a coat with braid. They said good morning to one of the station men, to the cook who was lolling out of the kitchen window in the restaurant, then disappeared into the doorway.

Came into the room and were met by all the children, sat down and talked.

There was nothing to be done for grandmother. No, it was too late. The doctor had examined her carefully and been so nice and kind. But there

was no help for it. It was cancer and had gone too far.

Well, well, said the old woman, God's will be done.

Mother told it all, not the old woman. She only put in a word occasionally.

It was extraordinary, she said, how good and kind he was with me. She'd always heard that he was so stern with people, they often shrank from going to him. But with her he'd sat talking as kindly as if she were a child. And he wouldn't let her pay anything, didn't think she could afford it. She thought that was really kind of him. In the ordinary way he'd have been very dear, he had so many qualifications. Yes, he was really nice.

The children stood round them, crying. Behind, out of the way a bit, stood Anders, pale as death, his face frozen and thrust forward, just staring at the old woman. She was sitting with mother under the windows which were frosted over with the cold. They didn't take it as anything dreadful. Why, mother seemed to be transfigured in some way, just as if she were not really there. But she patted grandmother's hand almost the whole time and did little things for her, folded her kerchief, put the folds right in her skirt. Something had been changed between them—grandmother was like a child which her wise mother took care of and looked after. The old woman seemed somehow perplexed by what had happened to her, some-

times absorbed by it as if it were an external event. Sat stroking the kerchief that lay in her lap, the fine wedding kerchief with the roses stamped on it. Then it seemed to occur to her that the children might be asking themselves how long she would still be living among them. And she said that she'd asked the doctor that, because she wanted to know how things were, so that when her time came she could be ready. But he had turned away and said he didn't know. She understood him then and was sorry she'd asked.

No, I said to the doctor, *we* know nothing about that.

The trains puffed and whistled outside, it was getting towards the time when there was most shunting. The smoke swept over the window-panes so that the ice thawed. Mother said it was time for a drop of coffee. Yes, that would be very nice, said the old woman; the girls went to get it ready.

Then they sat round the table, drinking it, not saying very much. The children sighed, bent over their cups, sometimes one of them had to get out a handkerchief, cry on the quiet. Anders wouldn't have any, kept on walking about, tiptoed on the rugs all round them, up to the windows and back again to the door, his face white.—His eyes were quite dry, somehow lustreless. Once the old woman met his frozen glance and nodded, smiled at him a little. But his face didn't change at all and he couldn't look her in the eyes.

When they'd finished coffee the old woman got up.

Now I must get back home to them. You'll come out and see me, won't you, my dears?

Then it broke out, the children couldn't hold their crying back. Mother had tears in her eyes, too, but she didn't cry.

Yes, mother dear, she said, we'll come now even more than we did before.

It's kind of you not to forget us, said the old woman.

It was the first time death had come near them at home, that was why it gripped them so hard. They felt how completely they belonged together, couldn't realize that one of them could go, could be lost, not be amongst them any more. All the warmth they had in them broke out and made them feel one, more than ever before. But it strengthened them and helped them in their distress.

Only Anders seemed to be outside the warm stream that ran through them. He crept a little way into the other room and watched them from there without a tear in his eyes. The children came up and patted the old woman awkwardly. But not he. It was as if he didn't love her as much as the others.

I've one or two jobs to do in the town, said the old woman, while they helped her on with her shawl, fastened it at the back. She had to go to the

ironmonger's and get some nuts for the chaff-cutter. And then Emil wanted a quarter of snuff from Lundgren's—he says he likes theirs so much better. And they must have a pound of coffee, too, for when they killed the pig next week. Mother asked her to promise not to be there when they killed it, she wouldn't be able to stand it, you got so cold. But she brushed it aside.

You know I've got to be by. I'm not in such a bad way yet.

What I can't see, she went on at the door, is how they're going to manage when I'm gone, it comes so dear having a stranger—they can't run to that.

She tied her kerchief and arranged it on her head.

Well, now I'll be going. And thanks for everything.

So she went off again with the milk-can in her hand.

Grandmother lived another year. In the summer she was able to help with the haymaking, and a little when they brought in the rye, too, but after that she had to stay in bed. They often went out and saw her between one train and the next, heard how she was getting on. Anders wouldn't go. He would make one excuse or another and they usually let him stay at home. Still he had to go sometimes. As they got nearer the farm he went paler and

paler. When they came in and he had to take her hand it was as if he could hardly do it. He would hardly look at her, not in the eyes. The others were just as usual, wouldn't show anything, just treated her specially kindly. To him it was as if she'd already changed, as if she were already dead. Sometimes she gave him a long look. Perhaps she thought that he wasn't so attached to her as she'd believed.

As soon as he could go he crept out. Walked down the paths in the garden. The flowers had no scent, none of all these flowers of grandmother's. He moped along by the currant bushes, remembered how he used to lie under them, in the blazing sun—and then she would come out on the steps. He looked in the arbour, where she used to sit shelling peas, it was like a great empty hole. Everything was changed, nothing was like it used to be. And yet the sun shone, as if it were midday and the height of summer. But now everything here was *marked*. It was not real.

He scrambled through the hawthorn hedge and stood looking over the countryside. It was absolutely empty. The grass fields lay there, the stony land with fences round it, and the farms lay scattered over the country—there, and there, and there. And yet it was just empty. And it was as if a hand had brushed over the marshes, everything was brushed away, there was nothing. Everything here *was marked*. It was *not real*.

Someone came out and called him. He crouched down behind the hedge.

Then he crept away towards the cowshed, looked in through the opening at the empty stalls where she used to go milking. What a nice, warm smell of milk there had been, especially on winter evenings when you came in from the cold. She used to press her forehead against the cow she was doing, and when you came in she didn't hear you with the hissing in the pail. He went behind the cowshed, out into a meadow with rowans and junipers, slunk along by the edges of it. Crept round the farm—and stared at the windows of the little room, where he knew that she and the rest of them were sitting.

At last it was time for them to get back to the train. Then he came and said good-bye to her like the others. Again she gave him a long look. It was as if she realized that he didn't care for her as much as they did.

He always felt it like that, only as a misery.

He remembered one time especially—mother and he came out one day in the summer. As they came up the path they saw the old woman, she was taking up potatoes in the garden plot. A few in a pan, to have for dinner. She was on her knees on the soil, because the pain wouldn't let her bend. When she'd finished she couldn't get up, mother and he had to help her. It was hard at first for her to stand, as if she just wanted to sink down again,

and her eyes were like glass, as though she didn't see them. He shook as if he too were going to sink down, couldn't keep himself upright or support her. But mother brushed the soil off her and helped her in.

Then he had to get away from them, stood by the end of the house and cried. That was perhaps the only time he was able to cry.

There was something inhuman in his horror of death. It was as if really he felt no pity. Everything was swallowed up in his horror at what was happening to her. He saw her before him continually, every day, from morning till night. Somehow he didn't think of *her*, only that she was going to die. Only of how dreadful it was that amongst them someone should be going about and dying. It was as if he didn't know who it was. When he remembered it he clung to his memory of her as she had been, when she was living, when she wasn't going to die. Now she no longer existed, you felt that she wasn't here, that she didn't belong here. You had to *remember* her.

There was something inhuman in this demented clinging to life—something deadly.

In the winter, after she'd had to take to bed, the old woman slowly dwindled away. She left them gradually, no longer saw them so clearly and couldn't quite follow when they talked to her. She couldn't follow the work on the farm either, sometimes she asked, wanted to know about this or that

—but when they told her it was as if she hadn't heard. Once, one evening, she'd asked where she was. And when they told her she was in the little side-room she was astonished, she'd thought the room was a lot bigger.

They wrote and told them things of this kind in the note that came with the milk. It came early every morning with a few lines from them. It was a cold winter and the note was always frozen, mother had to breathe on it before she could unfold it without spoiling the writing. She went out more and more often, and towards the end she stayed there. She and the old man, her father, were the ones who always kept watch by the dying woman. He sat over by the window and read out of the Bible. She looked after her, crept quietly in and out of the door, bent down to hear when she whispered what she wanted. The old man could no longer hear her. But she whispered to mother that she could hear when he read. So he sat there all the time and went on. The snow lay in drifts high up against the windows, in other places the earth was bare and several fruit trees were killed by the frost that winter.

All the children went out there one evening to say good-bye to her, but she couldn't really distinguish them. A few days later mother wrote with the milk that it was over.

Anders felt it almost as a relief. His brothers and sisters talked about grandmother the whole

day, what she'd been like that time and the other—often from a long time back—what she'd said *that* time, how early she always had to get up in the morning, what bread-twists she could bake, how she looked after her flower-beds, her peonies, how as a girl she'd once got lost in the woods and had to turn her jacket inside out—about everything. Anders kept joining in eagerly. He could remember too—yes, ever so much, ever so much! He talked, he remembered—and wherever the talk went on, in the kitchen, in the living-rooms, there he would be. He was glowing with eagerness and his eyes shone. . . .—It was as if she were alive again.

Mother came home to sew and fit out the children for the funeral. The girls, the two boys, there was work to be done for all of them. Anders was confirmed that year, he had his black suit earlier than the other boys. He'd never worn black before. It felt queer. People looked at you, at the crape band round your cap. Specially when the children were all together, mother with them perhaps, all in black—people looked at them and made way for them, greeted them in a special kind of way. You felt subdued when you had to go through the streets together. You felt different from other people.

On Sunday morning they went out to the funeral, early. Sprigs of fir had been strewn in the snow outside the gates and all up the path. The garden looked bare in the bleak weather, but

indoors it was warm. Some had arrived already, mostly old people who were warming their hands at the open fire where the fir-wood burnt and crackled, hissed out sparks on to the floor. The floor had been freshly scrubbed and the old women kept to the rugs, whispering together and greeting newcomers, with folded handkerchiefs in one hand. When the mourners from the town arrived, mother and father and all the children, it grew even quieter. All the old people came up and took their hands in a slow clasp. Little or nothing was said. In the middle of the room stood a tall red-bearded man who had moved to the district not many years before and talked out loud.

More and more arrived. Sledges drew up by the cowshed and old women bundled up in shawls got out. People came up the path the whole time, most of them old. Out on the roads you could see others who were also on their way, hobbling along, those who had to come on foot. Many like that had been asked, here at the farm, too, they had no horse and had borrowed one for the funeral. One after the other they came in, tall, thin peasant women, toothless, with sunken breasts, in black dresses that smelt of moth-ball, and men from the neighbouring farms in big bulging suits. The whole house was full: there were people in the rooms upstairs as well, where the floors had been cleared of onions and apples, you could hear them moving about.

Then the door into the side-room downstairs

was opened and an icy draught went through the whole house. They solemnly crowded in. You could smell the scrubbed floor which hadn't been able to dry in the cold, the strewn fir sprigs smelt wet from the snow in them which had hardly melted. They all crowded forward to see her for the last time, say good-bye. Old women who had always known her, whose heads shook with age, younger peasant wives who had never remembered her as different from what she looked as she lay there now, old and grey, old men who had danced with her at Harakulla when they were young, farm hands from Bolsgård and Jutargård whom Emil had had in and given coffee and spirits. Anders didn't press forward. He looked between the nearer ones, saw something of the forehead and a little thin hair; when someone moved and he saw that the mouth was gaping because the jaw had dropped, he gave a start and squeezed back behind the others till he could see nothing. But Helge, his elder brother, stood close by her the whole time. He was the child who'd loved her most, spent most time with her, and it didn't frighten him that she was dead, it was as if to him it was not bewildering. He had helped her to get up hay and to watch the cows, he had hoed turnips and cut lucerne, caught perch and roach for her in the stream, gone round the ledger lines in the mornings and come home with eels almost before she was up. He belonged here almost more than in the town, and no

one resembled the family out here so much as he did. He stood crying gently and quietly because he'd loved her.

When they began to put the lid on the coffin, Anders felt that he wanted to rush up to it. They had to wait a little because grandfather wanted to stroke her cheek first. And then they were such a long time before they got it screwed down. But when it was done he felt how dreadful it was that he alone hadn't taken a proper farewell of her. But it was too late now, and he stopped worrying, noticed that he could begin crying too, like the others.

Jacob of Skärvet, a venerable old man with snow-white hair that fell far down on his shoulders, struck up a hymn. His voice was cracked, but it didn't tremble, he had been a churchwarden for the greater part of his life and had sung over coffins as far back as they could remember. After that the coffin was carried out.

The horses stamped in front of all the sledges, chafing to be off. The men in their high hats with the pile rubbed up shook their whips at them, held them by the bit until the old people got in. The coffin was put on the first of the sledges and the farm hand from Jutargård drove it, because it was their horse. The cows were lowing in the shed, the fowls went under the shafts and pecked up oats. Now they were all ready and set off.

But grandfather stood by the gates, he wasn't

fit to go with them, he waved as long as they were in sight.

I shan't be long after Stina, was the last thing he'd said.

The road to the church ran along by the stream which lay frozen at its edges. And the marshes were frozen, the whole countryside. The farms looked bleak, as they do in winter when the trees don't screen them in the ordinary way. They might have been deserted. And, in fact, almost all the people were at the funeral, sitting here in the long row of sledges which looked like a timber train, so heavy that it could hardly be hauled. The runners kept catching where the ground was bare and the people sat jolting on the seats, looking around them. Up at the front the farm hand was sitting on the coffin among a few flowers brought from the town.

When they could be seen from the church the bells began to ring. The little doors in the tower had been thrown open and the bells rang out over the whole countryside, the waste tracts and the scattered villages, right to the farms over in the woods. And as far as it could be heard the men raised their hats, as the custom was, and the women curtsied. In a hamlet almost at the edge of the parish an old woman was sitting by a window, with a shawl over her breast so that she could bear having it open. She was the oldest in the parish, shrunken and doubled up—she hadn't left her cottage for many, many years, but her hair was

jet black, with not a single grey hair, her brown eyes were bright. She was father's mother. Perhaps she had Walloon blood, perhaps not—she had something foreign about her because she was darker than anyone was in the ordinary way round here. And she seemed somehow more distinguished than peasant women, although she was poorer, as a child she had been prepared for confirmation along with ladies. But now she sat there listening with the Bible in her lap and the window open to hear them ringing for old mother Stina, and when the first strokes reached her she clasped her hands and thrust her curiously small head out, so that the sparrows scattered into the air out of the corn sheaf that had been hung up for them from the window-frame.

The church stood on a little rise, quite insignificant like all the rises here. They drew up at the foot and carried the coffin up the slope. The bells were booming right overhead, out among the graves stood pale children from the confirmation class, girls holding each others' hands and gazing motionless at the procession, it was the time when they were being prepared for confirmation here as well as in the town.

The burial service was held in the church. Anders realized that it was beginning now—the worst. When the organ began it meant that they were going to sing the most dreadful hymn, the ghastliest words he knew. He drew back shrinking

in the pew and stared straight ahead. But they broke into the hymn almost ecstatically, clear children's voices from up in the choir and the whole congregation, all the old people down below, the organ boomed under the vaulting:

Towards death my path where'er I walk. . . .

Life—it was as if there were none, as if it were not needed—what was the good of it! It was as if they were stupefied, as if they were giving themselves up to something near and precious, more certain than anything else. And the minister read:

From dust thou camest. Unto dust thou shalt return. . . .

If only it were over, if only it could be over! These long solemnities round death—it was terrible. And then out to the grave!

All the church people came, the uninvited last. The freshly opened grave could be seen far off because the clods lay in a great heap at the side, they'd had to be prised up with crowbars, the ground was frozen three feet down. They all gathered round and then you heard her being lowered.

✧ Still, this wasn't so bad as he'd expected. Everything that goes on out of doors is easier. The wind was so cold that you shivered—you could

feel the chill of it. And the snow got into your overshoes. Boys he had played with stood looking at him.—It wasn't so oppressive and solemn. When he threw his flowers into the grave he was able to cry.

Then they went back to the church and stayed for the ordinary service.

Afterwards they went home, the whole long row as before. There had been a sprinkling of snow, so that it was easier going even over the bare ground. The horses were allowed to set their own pace and it didn't take long. Grandfather stood on the steps to receive them, looked for the empty sledge coming behind. Mother told him about it all, what had happened, the whole funeral from beginning to end. He asked what the roads had been like, she'd forgotten to mention that.

But dinner was ready, laid on two trestle tables placed at right angles, they were loaded with food and steam came in from the kitchen when they went backwards and forwards. The old women gave sidelong glances at the table, the men chafed their hands together after the cold and waited for their drinks.

They sat down and there they were sitting right on into the evening. Dishes were carried round, one after the other, simple but many, and a lot of each. You had to have some of them all, once at least, although several were almost the same. It was a sustaining feast, not meant just for

tasting. The men drank spirits with it. For the first hour they kept solemn. But later on they got talkative and called right across the table and from one end to the other, sprawled forward. They sat squeezed together so that they could hardly move. The chairs, borrowed from here, there and everywhere, were packed close. Up by the door there was only a plank to sit on and the bench that stood in the arbour in the summer. When any of the old men by the wall had to go outside they all had to make way for him, it didn't go unnoticed, and the women who never went out made good-natured protests. It grew livelier as it went on and the room and every one in it warmed up. The open fire in the hearth burnt up well in the heat. They sweated.

The sense of well-being grew. They talked. Old men who were known as wags livened up and began to feel their way with a broad grin, tried their hand on each other. Those near by listened, the women with their heads on one side. Other men sat talking seriously, about heifers that were going to calve, chalk and hypophosphates, making drains and reclaiming bogs. But always in a loud voice, so that every one should know what they thought about this and the other and what they thought here and now.

Apart from the farmers there was Massa-Janne, a short little tailor, born and bred in the parish. He spluttered when he talked, and he'd

made all the clothes for the big fellows here. When he was measuring he stood on a footstool, savage because it was necessary, but getting his own back by spluttering on them all the time. And the miller, who was the only fat one at the funeral, with a backside that bulged out over the chair and between the rails at the back. Anders who was sitting beside him saw that the tuft of hair in his ear was mealy. And perched on the garden bench furthest off by the door sat Peter of Lyekan, who was a thin man and hadn't any land. He never spoke and never looked up, just hung his shaggy head over the plate. They said that he didn't eat for several days if he thought he was going to be asked out. Sometimes he made a mistake, and had to start eating again. At home he had boiled potatoes and stale bread in the table drawer, which he pushed under if anybody came. But probably the truth was just that he was poor and needed food, his own and other people's too. And they didn't really mind about it, though they sometimes chaffed him a bit. He sat furthest off by the door, partly because he was the least important and partly because it was darker there and they didn't notice how much he took.

Round about five, after all the meat, the sweets began; it was already pitch dark. Every one's contribution had to be brought out, curd cakes, cream cheeses, abundance of every sort. They were much alike, but people recognized their own by the cloth

round the copper dish and each housewife saw to it that every one tasted hers. Nothing is more filling than that kind of thing. They straightened themselves up and grunted with satisfaction, feeling they'd well deserved it, even Peter of Lyckan heaved himself up a bit and glowered timidly a little way down the table.

It seemed fine to Anders with all the buzz and warmth, all the old men and women talking and eating and not like they were before. It felt so safe here. The fire crackled and the heat seemed to bemuse you. He sat by the wall. Behind their backs the window-panes were pitch black, but here in the room there was light enough. In the middle of the trestle table stood the big paraffin lamp and the small one right at the end, down by the door there were candles, everywhere was lit up. But in the place of honour by the minister sat mother, pale and still, pale somehow because of all the light. She didn't seem to be talking to anyone.

Now dinner was almost over. But last and most impressive was a cake from the town, decorated in black and white, with a great black cross in the middle. It was greatly admired, every one had to have some. Anders shuddered when it got near him. He let it go past though he could see that he'd never had anything so good. The miller took a great bit of the cross and ate it all at one go.

Then at last they got up, the minister solemnly said grace.

Doors were thrown open and they scattered. The porch was full of clothes as if a whole parish lived in the house, you could hardly get past among the piles of overcoats that smelt of hay and the cowshed. But the rooms upstairs were empty, and there it was pleasantly cool after all the heat. A faint smell lingered from the apples and onions, behind the mirror was a bunch of lavender which grandmother used to take a little of when she went to church. There they went for coffee. With biscuits for the women and brandy for the men. It was soon hot and full of people there too, they gossiped and gossiped.

Anders didn't quite know what to do with himself. He was the youngest, had no one of his own age to go with. He wandered about at random for a bit, or stood against a wall somewhere. Pushed the kitchen door ajar, as he used to; there were only strange people there, clearing away and washing up, and whole heaps of china that didn't belong here at the farm, the plates had a rose in the middle. Then he went upstairs, looked into the rooms, stood still and listened. The women were sitting in one, but in the other the old men were roaring over their toddy glasses, it was thick with smoke and they were all talking at once, no one could be heard, just noise and confusion. He enjoyed it there. Still, after a while he went down again. On the wall at the side of the stairs was a crude painting showing the road from the farm

to the church, the farm at the bottom and the church at the top with a few crosses and birches round it, and the road winding along by the hand-rail. But to-day he didn't look at it, hurried down. Pushed open the outer door, went out on to the steps of the porch.

It was pitch dark. Cold but perfectly still, no wind. Among the currant bushes a few old peasants stood pissing, big and broad in the darkness, it was like the gushing from horses. To the east the stars were showing, there were clouds everywhere else. When the old men had gone he stayed there by himself in the stillness.

Down in the cowshed he could see a light shining through the little window where the cows were, but dimly, because the pane was covered with cobwebs. After a while someone came out with the milk-pail in one hand and the lantern in the other. She went up the path. The light travelled over the ground and over the grey skirt that reached down to her feet. When she got near the house with its lights she turned aside down the kitchen path. He saw that she was a middle-aged stranger whom he didn't know.

Down by the stream the ice was crackling, it was freezing over, it struck him that it was cold and that he was only here to do the same as the old men. But he went over to the apple tree by the gable, because that was where he always went.

There was a hubbub of voices from the whole

house. It was so crammed with people that it seemed to creak, garrulous people, not used to talking much. He stood with his back to it. But through the hubbub came a voice that seemed not to be talking to anyone, a calm and clear voice that nothing interrupted, that no one made any reply to.

He turned round. Down in the gable was a window that seemed extraordinarily quiet, just as if no one were inside. It was in the little side-room—he stood looking towards it.

When he'd finished he went up and looked in. Inside sat his grandfather upright in the bed which his old wife had died in, reading out of the Bible that lay wide open on the sheep-rug in front of him. He had a clean shirt on, you could see it was quite new, the linen was unbleached. And the sheets hadn't been used before, they were perfectly smooth. His white hair, freshly combed, fell down on his shoulders, every strand lay in place. He sat solemnly, as if it were a great ceremony. The sprigs of fir were still on the floor, tall juniper bushes stood in the corners.

Anders breathed heavily against the pane so that it got misted over. He wanted to go, but he wiped the window and stayed there. The crust on the drift of snow that lay up against the wall wouldn't bear him any longer, he sank through. He could feel the stalks in the flower-bed underneath the snow. Now he had to heave himself up

as far as he could so as to see, the window-pane was frozen at the bottom.

The old man sat motionless. Upstairs they were talking and shouting, he took no notice of it, perhaps didn't hear it. Read in the loud voice that he had always had, the toothless mouth was moving. Anders could hear every word distinctly.

At last he shut the Bible and clasped his hands over it.

Amen. In the name of God Almighty. Amen.

But when he had laid the book on the chair beside him he gazed across the room and began speaking again.

At the last day the Lord thy God shall waken thee.

Then he lay down and blew out the light, and the darkness seemed just to swallow him up.

Anders was now growing out of childhood. He began to roam about the town and far out on the roads, with friends and without, as though he didn't like being at home. He felt such a strange weight there. There was something oppressive in all that constraint, all the heaviness in his home. And in the way everything there was bound together, the people and what they had around them, everything was just one. The old furniture and the air in the rooms, the rag mats, woven in the country, and those who walked about on them—it seemed all one and the same. When you came in through the door and spoke to the people in the rooms—then it

was just that you'd come home. And when they sat round the lamp after supper and his sisters crocheted and the lamp-light reached half-way up the wall and you heard the trains outside—then it was just an evening at home. Father and mother read the Bible, as they always had, serious and burdened by the words. It felt like a weight on your chest. And yet everything was peace. Everything secure and calm. Why should it be!

They were all bound together. They had everything in common. Seemed to sit shut up in a room by themselves, cut off from the world. Lived all one and the same, their life which never seemed to change. . . .

They were just a family, not separate people—you'd got to break out of it, be a self apart!

And now he began to break out of it.

It wasn't noticed. No one could notice it. It was hard for anything in them to show itself, to come to the surface. It just buried itself, hid away so that they didn't really understand it themselves. They only felt it. It was so with everything, they only felt it. And now he was feeling this. Groped his way through it, crouching, as if in a cellar.

What was happening was brutal, like a birth. With the same distress and anguish, anxiety for a new waking life and for an old. And in some way sickening—because something was falling to pieces, changing, almost rotting. What was it that was changing! Why was it changing!

Animals drag themselves away when they're going to bear young, into their holes, into the darkness, howl where no one can hear them and moan as they bite through the navel string. And the blind litter sniffs at the blood the earth sucks up. . . .

Belonging to a family—why should you!

He felt the pain of what was going on within him. And yet he carefully probed each little change, to make sure of keeping up with it all the time. He seemed almost to relish it. . . .

For the first time he felt what incoherence and cheating there is in living. How half-heartedly and insincerely you can live, and still manage. Life itself forces you into it and sees to it that you get on. Every foothold slips away from you—you still keep going. For the first time he wasn't living in the middle of himself. He always had done until now.

It was the beginning of youth, the most wretched age of man. And rightly, because it is the falsest, most unreliable, most worthless. Those who haven't discovered this have been so false that they have deceived even themselves. Childhood, manhood, age, they can all be meaningful and real for us. Youth is something unworthy of men. A rootlessness, an irresponsible freedom, of personality, a fertilizing disintegration, insincerity, falsity, in life itself—but unworthy of men. No doubt that's why all the hollow phrase-mongers shout about it, they

got on best then. It was their time. It was then that the least was required of them and the most offered. But he was still only at the beginning.

He edged away from their God, stole away without being noticed. Before long he was standing outside in the darkness and all around him was empty space. He shuddered—almost with pleasure. He felt how it *is*, really *is*—just empty. Yes, it was empty, *he* knew that. He'd known that a long time, as long as he could remember. So it was better really to feel it, to stand right out in the darkness—it was easier that way. A great destiny to support.

If he could only stay there in the emptiness, only exist there. There would be nothing to lament in that fate, it would suit him well. In the darkness—he would do well there.

But he was going to die. Soon. They all knew it. They did know it of course? It was the lung trouble he'd got, he was going to die of that. People always kept a few paces away from him so that he shouldn't infect them. His brothers and sisters too, though they disguised it a bit more, didn't want him to notice it too obviously. That wounded you just the same—in fact worse. They could have saved themselves that! He would have liked to shout it in their faces.

That they always kept about two steps away from him—wasn't it obvious enough. Could there be any doubt about it! Hadn't he eyes! Didn't he observe it all, every look, every tone, every little

word, even those they whispered in the kitchen, in the little room, where they shut themselves in—they shut the door between the rooms, it had never been shut before! Didn't he realize that they'd already begun to mourn for him. . . . Didn't he feel their oppression, a gloomy distress in the house—the horror of someone walking about among them and dying! He saw it all, he understood it all. It was clear enough. . . .

Only his mother showed nothing, didn't mind how near she came. But then she stood above and beyond both illness and death, beyond everything, wasn't part of this. She was so good. She was afraid that he should notice anything at all, things must be as usual, he mustn't be allowed to guess anything, only feel how much he was loved, especially now, how they thought of him—she went about constantly thinking of him, of his illness, she always wanted to be near him, as if no one could say how long. . . . She betrayed herself more than anyone else!

This spring he had an egg for lunch when he came in from school, something the others didn't have, she said he needed it. Every day it was waiting there as a reminder . . . in case he might have forgotten. And she took the chair next to him and talked—after all there were plenty more chairs round the kitchen table, there were only the two of them at home at his break, she didn't need to sit just there! Talked about everything except what

they were both thinking of, talked as if to prevent him from getting worked up, so gently that it hurt him, never a reproach, never a hard word, although he'd stopped going to church, although he'd stopped saying grace, she forgave it all, took no notice. . . . He couldn't bear her tenderness. If only he could have hated her!

All that kindness, all that affection there was at home—you couldn't bear it. Never a raw gust of wind to sweep in. You sat shut in, protected, comfortable, in a peace that bound them together—but didn't liberate them, didn't help them. There was a dull heat inside them that never burst into flame but just gave out warmth, warmth, nothing ran to waste, there was no fire to be seen. . . . Perhaps that was why it troubled and oppressed him so much, because it never burst into flame, never burnt up! They only had it to warm themselves by. And his parents' fear of God, heavy and primitive, a primeval calm that they tried to feel—while they sighed, just sighed. It pressed down and down, as if it wanted to smother you. . . . You had to break out of it!

No, the new doctrine that you picked up, which swept away God and all expectation, which laid life open and raw in all its nakedness, all its systematic meaninglessness, that was better, that helped. And it was true too. No faith—just things as they are.

Nothing made any difference to him, he who

was only going to die. But all the same he must break out of it! Out where it was colder, raw—so that you could breathe for the little while you had left.

Yes, it was good to know that it was empty. It prepared you for what was coming. You could perhaps get used to the emptiness, so that you didn't think of it as so dreadful and need not live so feverish, anguished for the little while. . . .

No, he could never get used to it! But he soaked up the doctrine, greedily, revelled in it. It seemed to be made for him. It helped him, hardened his heart. And it explained his childhood, all the desolation and anguish that had been lying in wait in the surrounding darkness, in spite of the security of his home, in spite of all he had possessed there. . . . What he felt had been right!—Now he felt it even more, and it was still more right.

It didn't make him calm or happy, but it had to be. Everything was slipping away, there was no firm ground—he was slipping with it. Nothing was certain, nothing stood fast—you could believe anything before long. Only the emptiness stood all round unchanging. Only the anguish gnawed and gnawed, eating a hole in you . . . you could feel it in your breast, the hole grew bigger and bigger. . . .

When he was weary and thought how he was only going to die, he felt like giving up. To break away, what use was that? Better to sink into peace in the security of home, where it was all so certain, and mother would sit holding his hand, and read to

him out of the hymn book, as she would so gladly, as he knew she would so gladly. . . .

No. It wouldn't do. You'd got to have the truth. Just as it *was*. Even if you were only going to die, you'd got to live life just as it is—at home it was stifling with all the security and peace! You'd got to break out of it!

He realized that. He was doing it. . . .

He felt almost hunted. . . . And his body was often so hot, as if it were burning. . . . Very likely it was the illness, the fever. . . . Or the instincts that were waking, that had lain hidden in the child and now broke out, dull and unconscious, more and more suffocating. . . . Perhaps they were the hunters! He didn't know. No one knew. You scudded on, not knowing where. . . . With only the beginnings of brutality as a helpless defence, an attempt to understand what it was all about and conceal all one's uncertainty and longing from others and from oneself.

But he was going to die. It all meant nothing to him, he was only going to die. Walked about waiting—nothing more. He seemed to be standing outside. Like someone listening by a door. . . .

That was how he felt. That was how things were for him.

But life is mercifully confused, not simply one. Least of all for him, who was constantly swinging from one thing to another.

As a matter of fact he was mostly bright and

cheerful. No one could notice anything else, not even he himself often.

The least little thing could make his heart leap with zest. Just that it was sunny for a moment. Or a shower of rain if there'd been sun for a long while. Or nothing at all—just that it hadn't changed for a long while, that it stayed as it was. Anything at all. As soon as he came up from his cellar the world lay strangely open to him. Then there was nothing wrong, not a cloud in sight. And at those times all that was good and orderly in it was real and tangible. Yes, if he wanted he need only stick his head out through the opening. . . .

This life that he had inside himself mingled with a variety of other experiences, one thing and another. In the winter, for example, when they went skating, nearly all day, slipped away across the lakes that lay everywhere. Where one ended the next began. They walked on the point of the skates over the strip of land, struck out across the next. If the school was shut for cleaning they could set out early, when there was morning frost and the ice rang, old men stood fishing through a hole in the ice far out, looked like small dots. If you came up to them they didn't say a word, just glared. You pretended not to notice, did a silent figure eight and then shot off again. You easily got right away to the signalman's house at Näs, flew round the point and scared the fowls with wild outside edges, so that they

tore away to the house panic-stricken. Here as in many places there was a current underneath, because a stream ran out at that point, you had to keep an eye open for those, there were sometimes branches to mark them, sometimes not. There were big and little islands that you could skate round in that lake. And on the north-east shore there were the bathing-places, they looked funny now it was winter, you could hardly recognize the bush that you undressed by.

Then in the evening they got together a heap of reeds and made a fire, came charging along with great armfulls from the creeks, right up to the fire, swung aside just in time and flung them in. The flames shot up, right into the sky, flakes of ash swirled round in eddies. The ice melted, crackled because of the heat and because there were too many of them standing round. It split. Roared far out into the darkness.

They came home starving, their faces red, dried their skates at the fire. Their toe-nails got ingrown, and they had to have warmed-up food, dinner and supper were both over long ago.

It was a fine life. Nothing wrong with it. It wasn't like his. But wasn't he in this too, really?

Yes, he had different kinds of life, two at least. And he felt almost as if they had nothing to do with each other. He could break off completely, be as lively as anything. . . . But the cheerful vigour would break off suddenly as well.

Anyhow he got on fine living like that, different kinds of life. It was exciting. And so it need be when your time was so short.

That illness now, what was it really? When he wasn't actually thinking about it, it gave him no trouble at all. Yes, you'd got to be carefree a bit, let things take their own course. That's what they would do anyhow.

He had friends, hung about with them. There was one called Jonas, a good fellow, he was from the country, he was studying for something. In the winter-time they had profound talks with one another, in the summer they snared pike. He had a wooden arm, he'd had his right arm cut off in a threshing machine when he was a child. But he was handier than anyone, could do everything with just his left hand and do it better than most. He was specially good at snaring pike, and they spent a lot of time at that in the summer when Anders was staying with him at his home, some miles out from the town. There were lakes there, too, several. One with low muddy grass edges was specially good, you crept right out to the edge where the pike lay asleep in the blazing sun.. You had to take off your shoes higher up on the edge of the wood a long way from the lake—even then it wasn't easy to move quietly and it got harder and harder because of the squelching. Jonas always went first, that was only right, he was the one who could catch them. Anders came behind, he got the tag

end of it. If he squelched too much Jonas shook his one good fist at him and a deathly quiet fell. He was incredible. Crouched down and crept along the edge, saw the pike a long way off where they dozed under the water-lily leaves. Made a noose in the gut, drew it over their heads, and so it was done. It wasn't long before they had a whole row spiked on a crotched stick. He was the plague of the people who thought they owned the fishing, those who couldn't catch anything.

It didn't follow that he came home with a lot. He was just as glad to give them away going home. Sometimes there wasn't a fin left, and his mother grumbled when they arrived crestfallen at the cottage; afterwards she'd get them coffee and cakes.

The village where they lived was strangely desolate, so Anders thought at least, but perhaps it was because he was a stranger. The houses were all unpainted and not too well kept, often only three or four of the windows had curtains. It wasn't well looked after outside either, no gardens, just the bare earth with the well and perhaps an apple tree. Whether that was the reason or not, there was a curiously empty and unfriendly look between the houses, although they were so close together. It looked as though people never called on one another, didn't really know each other. But Jonas knew them all, greeted them cheerfully—girls who were drawing water, farm hands who were carting

dung or hay. And you could tell they were used to shaking hands with him, it couldn't have come easy at first, because he used the left.

There were big woods round the village. And he went shooting as well. He was notorious for that too. Brought up his gun with a jerk and had the aim at once, as he had to if he were to hold it still. Shot hares and ducks, woodcocks, anything there was. And in the autumn capercailzies by torchlight, which was forbidden and customary in that part. He was handy at everything.

They had a good time in the country. It was different of course in the winter in town. Then they had to spruce themselves up, their conversations became more solemn and more enlightened in every way when they went for a walk in the most distinguished of the streets. But they forgot themselves sometimes, slouched along as if they were on a country road. Jonas was by nature remarkably carefree in the way he walked. It was as though nothing mattered very much. Every now and again he pulled at his wooden arm up by the shoulder to see that it was still there all right. At those times his face was always lit up by a good-natured grin.

Here in town he tended to be a bit vain. The glove on the artificial hand always had to be correct, the moment it was worn and the wood stuck through he bought a new one. One specially lovely spring when he began to go with a girl he

got himself a light grey one and was more elegant than ever.

But he was superb. He had a roguish half-smile that would have taken him far if he'd bothered about it. But he'd already seen through the world, discovered pretty well what it was like and soon went back to his village, he'd just as soon live there.

Then there was another called Murre, small, no bigger than a midget. He'd known him right from his first school, after that Murre had left and gone to be a cycle repairer. They only met on Sundays now when he was free. If they ran across each other in the street on a week-day his hands were greasy and he wouldn't shake hands with more than his thumb. But every Sunday he came along in a stiff turn-down collar like a gentleman, and they went out for a walk together, puffing at penny cigars that Murre was able to provide for them by his work.

Generally they followed the railway line out into the woods and then walked about the roads there. They'd played there as boys, knew every bit of it. They liked to talk of that time as something long passed, smiled indulgently when they found that they could still recall this and the other from that time.—But if they went past the stone that Anders had out there, he walked along looking in the other direction and talked eagerly all the time. They didn't possess that in common, the other knew nothing about it.

He had these and several more. One who never talked sense, whose good sense consisted in that. One who lived in beauty, none of the others knew what it was. And with all of them their talk was deep and considered.

But there was a lot that you could never talk about to anyone. All that you were really thinking about. Or what you just had in you, what weighed on you.

After having parted towards evening from his Sunday friend the cycle repairer he often had to go out to the stone again. He was tired by then and in other ways, too, it was no pleasure to him. He just went all the same.

On the way he tried to think what it was like when they'd been there just a little before—that it was exactly the same now of course. It hadn't got dark yet, there was still almost as much light. He thought of lots more things that went on from day to day, and that he thoroughly enjoyed, there were plenty of those. And how he was bound up with them, really belonged amongst them! Yes, didn't he take ever so much more pleasure in everything than most of the others? Couldn't he be overflowing with it, sometimes at least, with everything around him, with a joy that came from he didn't know where. . . . Yes, that's how it was.

Living in this way, having his being and looking around him, as he was on the embankment now this evening, wasn't he really quite happy?

Just as happy as the rest. Yes—so he was. Exactly like the rest.

What he himself had to put up with specially, that was just something he imagined. That was of no account.

That he had come out here, for instance. That had nothing to do with him, with anything that he was. Not now. As a child he had been driven by an inner need, lain here in deep and possessing faith, as if in ecstasy. Later he had gone on with it with a sense of working through its stages. In the end it had become just an empty convention.

By now it was hardly that even. Had no meaning. He just did come out here.

Now he was standing there. Came and stood on the same spot as always, you could see the mark in the grass. He didn't fall on his knees, hadn't for many years. But he clasped his hands as hard as he could, so hard that he seemed to feel it in his whole body, really *feel* that he was clasping his hands. With that he reached a sort of numbness. Then he prayed.

But only that he might live. Nothing else. Just as before, just as always. Just to live—nothing beyond that. Then everything could go as it would. So long as he didn't die.

He didn't think of any God. Hadn't any faith. And not a thought of its helping him in any way, giving him an inner strength, having any sort of meaning in it. It meant nothing.

What he prayed for—that didn't matter either. But there had to be something. And so it was always that, always the same.

No, it meant nothing. It was just a compulsion, he realized himself that it only came from being overwrought.

He was free. He had broken out of it.

One autumn night Anders was on his way through the town. He was going up to the north part, almost on the outskirts. It was overcast and getting dark, it had been raining a little while before. The streets were wet, shone wherever there was a street lamp, only every other one was alight. It was deserted, no one about, only a policeman on the corner by the square. There were lights there in the windows, but the blinds were drawn, they were playing a piano in one house. He kept on past them. Walked quickly, with his collar turned up.

When he came to Norrgatan he turned through a gateway, into a courtyard. It was almost pitch black there, difficult to see, there were carts standing about and heaps of old iron, a jumble of old scrapped wheels and rusty iron plates. Furthest in was a small, low house with a light burning, but the windows lay in the other direction. You could hear singing from inside, but faintly as if the walls were very thick. Still the singing was enough to guide him so that he found the entrance. He opened the door and went in.

It was a gloomy, whitewashed room, small windows, the roof like a vault. In the middle a massive pillar that you could see wasn't meant as a support, it blocked the view, so that you couldn't see the whole room. Old women were sitting huddled up on unpainted benches, a few young men with their caps on their knees, young women, a few boys behind the pillar. Up at the front was a platform with two paraffin lamps hanging down from the roof. Sitting there in the light were salvationists, up against the wall, by the rail at the front stood two women, officers, singing to the guitar. He went and sat down on a bench.

There was heating, but the room wasn't warm. They all kept their coats on. They sat on benches, huddled together in the body of the hall where it was almost dark, the front benches stood empty. Nearest the door sat mad Johan from the workhouse, alone, his head thrust forward and his eyes shining in the darkness. The walls glistened with water, they were sooty where the whitewash had flaked off. It was an old disused smithy, which had been rented to them. The forge had been in the middle, it was bricked in.

They sang—clearly and rather shrill, but still with feeling, it was mostly women. The guitars twanged. The singing sounded shut in, as if it were a cellar. You could hear the two officers' voices above all the others, truer and better trained. They stood in the middle of the light, with upturned

faces, burning eyes, ecstatic, never looked down at the book like the others, knew it by heart. They had their coats on, buttoned up to the throat. One was dark and full blooded, with something restrainedly sensual in her shining eyes and about her mouth when she parted her big warm lips. The other was slight, almost like a child. Her delicate form seemed to draw no strength from itself, but stood there surrendered to the light. There was something pathetic about her, something at the same time helpless and courageous. Her face was pale, the features as it were poor, like a peasant girl's, they weren't delicate perhaps, but they had a sensitiveness that was much more beautiful. Her eyes were not bright, there was just a quiet light within them. Her hair showed under the bonnet, lay pale and delicate on her cheeks, seemed almost without colour. And burning like fire. Like a flame, fed with wax.

Anders looked at her the whole time. He knew her.

They were working up. Sang more fervently, as if to fan the embers within them into a flame. At first you felt that it was deliberate. Then it began to burst forth of itself, they were carried away, seemed to be tranced. Someone began to testify. And the others murmured after him. Thanks be to Jesus, Praise be, glory to Thee! Hallelujah! Praise and glory. They sighed and prayed with their faces in their hands. One woman sat rocking

to and fro. The soldier who was testifying was wrought up by them, spoke more vehemently, stood with his eyes shut, the words poured out of his mouth. He stood as if in a trance. And the others were carried with him, it was as though a wave lifted them, rose and fell, carried them all with it. Someone down in the hall began to groan. Right back in the darkness mad Johan sat gaping with fevered eyes.

Anders felt more and more uncomfortable. It almost sickened him. It was stifling, you could scarcely breathe. . . .

They gabbled on. They didn't even talk about God, but just of Jesus and again Jesus, that was something specially repugnant to him, that part of the faith that had first repelled him, become most foreign to him. They sighed and rejoiced about that alone. The whole air hung heavy, it weighed on your chest, you gasped, couldn't get your breath. . . . It was something worked up, overwrought—nothing for him.

She was going to testify now, the young salvation officer whom he knew. She went up to the rail and began to speak without looking up. You could see that she was uncertain, not quite used to being an officer yet. But there was light about her. She told how she'd been saved, how Jesus had come to her. Thanks be! Praise and Glory! How He took her out of her sin and grief and gave her a new life. It was so much better now. She didn't fret about

anything now, as the children of the world do. All her troubles she laid on Him. She said it so simply that there was nothing miraculous left in it. And yet she seemed to shine.

Anders sat in quiet wonder, motionless, his eyes fixed on her. The boys tittered behind the pillar. He started as if he'd woken up. But he forced himself not to hear, to notice nothing but her.

She gained courage. Now and again she raised her eyes, looked up into the hall. But the mumble of prayer on all sides didn't work upon her, when they sighed and groaned her voice only grew warmer in some way. There was something clean and poor about her as she stood there in her coat of dark blue serge. It was worn. It was quite shiny in some places, especially on the left side, where she used to carry the bundle of papers when she was out selling *The War Cry*. But he liked the look of the worn places here in the lamp-light. It was as if there were light on the cloth. It suited her. Anders thought so anyhow. He never took his eyes off her, off her face, which grew more exposed as she talked, as if you were seeing her for the first time now. The pale mouth seemed to smile when she opened it. But it wasn't a smile, only something sensitive and good in the lips themselves. It just *was*.

When she stopped they began to pray with the unconverted down in the hall. Kneeled by the benches, praying. The soldiers up on the platform sang meanwhile, worked up feeling. The guitars

twanged. You could hear the groaning through it all. In the gloom you could see hardly anything, just that some of them were bowed over the benches. It was they who groaned.

The praying grew more fervid. It went on and on. All who were saved prayed. Gabbled on, burning. 'O Jesus, our Saviour! Look upon the sinner, O let him find you! O let him find you now, now to-night! O save a soul to-night! O, before we part, let a soul be saved. O, then shall we sing and praise Thee! O Jesus! O let this meeting not have been in vain! O open the gates of heaven for a sinner to-night!'

They went on and on. The whole room had grown hot, the air felt heavy, unendurable. . . .

Anders sat pale, tense, his eyes feverish . . . he gasped, his breast was heaving violently. . . . It seemed as though he was going to begin groaning with them! Begin screaming! He wanted to. . . .

He clung to the bench. . . .

A little way in front a young salvation officer was praying with a working woman. He caught a glimpse of her face. Saw that she was perfectly calm. She wasn't worked up like him. Why wasn't she?

Quietly, with clasped hands, she knelt and whispered. Perhaps she was praying—perhaps only talking—you couldn't hear. Her lips moved, but it couldn't be for vehement words, you could see that. Everything about her was simple and ordinary. Her shoes stuck out from the bench, her skirt was a

little crumpled. Only the red band round the bonnet flamed above her.

They implored and prayed. Sang and sang—the same, always the same. They groaned in the benches, sighed, wrestled. They sweated the soul out of themselves, the whole room felt full up . . . the vaulted roof pressed down, the walls squeezed together, you were cooped in, couldn't escape.

At last one of them dragged himself to the front, a young man, tottered as if asleep, up into the light, clung to the rail, cried out that he was saved, his face was washed out, empty, expressionless, he just looked dazed . . . then he began gabbling, the words poured out of him. . . . They rejoiced and sang! The guitars twanged. Thanks be! Praise be to Thee! Thanks be to Jesus! They took up the collection. Sang once more. Thanks be to Jesus! Praise be to Thee.

At last it was over. Anders hurried out. Across the yard, out into the street, the first to come out.

Turned up his collar, walked up and down. He was waiting for her.

What he felt was nausea. Complete loathing. And icy cold within him, violent resentment against anything that might threaten to touch him. . . . They crowded out from the meeting, old women, ugly young women with shuffling feet, boys who ran about grinning, mad Johan and the man who'd been saved. . . . He found them revolting. Slipped

over to the other side so as not to be seen, felt ashamed to be waiting.

When the street was empty she came. In her uniform—why should she go about dressed like that!

They went out of the town, made for the road to the east where they always walked. It was finer now. In some places the sky was clear, and when they got out into the country the moon came out.

He could see her. Her face showed distinctly.

He asked her how on earth she could have thought of joining the army. She told him. There were so many at home, seven children, and she was the eldest. There wasn't enough to go round and she had to go into service. But she wasn't strong, and you've got to be if you're to work for other people. There were times when she had to give up simply from tiredness. But then she'd been saved, and there'd been no trouble of that sort since then. . . .

Did she believe! Yes, of course she believed! Jesus had taken her to Him. That evening, she'd never forget it! Yes, she was saved, she knew it. And there's nothing so wonderful as to know that. But it was good to know that she was secure too, well provided for, had food, and they got clothes in the army too. And if there was anything special they needed they could apply for it, and they generally got it. Yes, she was much better off now than ever before. She had put her life in God's

hands. But she'd have liked to be at home with mother and the children if she'd been allowed, if she'd been able to support herself there.

Anders listened. Her bonnet hid her face when they went along side by side. But her voice was her too. . . . Yes. That was the way she explained it.

She said it all so simply and quietly. How could she?

They came nearer to the lake. Crossed the narrow-gauge railway that ran along by the edge. There were no trains here so late, it seemed deserted, as it does by a level-crossing when you just see the line disappearing away in both directions. But a signalman was getting back home in the darkness, you could hear the trolley further and further off in the woods.

The road grew muddy near the lake, her overshoe got stuck. They had to walk on the grass at the side, close to one another. He felt the warmth from her, and her breathing . . . and her slight hand in his. They went in silence for a long while. . . . Supposing he loved her?

Some carts were coming towards them, a whole row. The horses were worn out, their heads hanging, the men sat as if they were asleep. It was men bringing herrings from the coast, sixty miles away, it was market day to-morrow. With their food and their bottle of spirits beside them they were asleep on top of the herrings, they glistened in the moonlight behind their backs.

They hurried back into the town. He felt that he wanted to escape from her. Or begin to talk blasphemously of what she believed in, tear down something she had. But they went along in silence.

The streets were deserted. He saw her to the smithy. There was a bit built on to it at the back, a hovel where she lived. It revolted him to stand here again by the wall that they'd been bawling and screaming behind. They parted. She went into the house as if it had been a human dwelling.

Set free from something he started on his way home.

So ended his early youth, in nothing but dissolution, falsity, confusion.

THE HANGMAN

THE hangman sat drinking at a dimly lit table in the tavern. In the light of the one smoky tallow candle which the taverner let them have he hung over the table big and powerful in his blood-red dress with his hand across his forehead where the mark of the hangman was burnt in. A few master-craftsmen and journeymen from the neighbourhood were shouting over their pots further down the table; no one sat on his side. With noiseless steps the girl crept across the stone floor and her hand shook as she filled up his tankard. An apprentice who had slipped in and kept himself out of sight in the darkness devoured him with burning eyes.

It's good ale, master hangman! shouted one of the journeymen. You know how the old woman's been up the gallows hill, and made off with one of your thief-fingers and hung it on a thread in the cask. She won't see anyone with better ale than hers, she'll do anything for her guests. And there's nothing gives such body to the ale as a finger from the gallows, you know!

Yes, it's uncommon strange with anything that comes from thereabouts, said a little wry-mouthed old cobbler thoughtfully wiping the ale out of his

withered beard. What a wonderful power it has.

You're right about that! I remember I was there once when they hanged a country fellow in my parts for poaching, though he said he was innocent. When master hangman kicked 'un off the steps and the rope gave jerk he let out a fart that stank over the whole hill-side, and the flowers wilted and the meadow on the east side looked scorched and blighted—for there was a west wind, I ought to say—and it was a bad harvest out that way that summer.

They laughed, sprawling across the table.

Father used to tell how in his young days there was a tanner who'd gone a-whoring with his brother's wife, and the same thing happened to him when his turn came, that's nothing to wonder at when you've got to depart this life so hurriedly. When they fell back with the force of it they saw a cloud going up to the sky, so black that it was frightful to see, and in the stern sat the devil himself with the sinful soul steering off with a fire prong and grinning with pleasure at the smell.

I won't listen to your nonsense, the old man went on, looking sidelong in the hangman's direction. I mean what I say about the power of such-like things, for it's certain sure they have it. Take Kristen now, Anna's boy, him that was possessed and fell down and foamed at the mouth. I was often there myself and helped to hold him and get

his mouth open, and it was terrible the way it worked on him, worse than any I ever saw. But after his mother pushed him to the front the time when Jerker the smith paid with his head, and he got down a little of the blood, that was the healing of him. He's never fallen down since then, not once.

That's right enough.

You know that as well as I do, living right next to 'em.

Yes, there's no one doubts that.

No, that's the way it was, that's known the world over.

But it must be murderer's blood, and with warmth in it still, it's no use unless.

No, of course.

No. It's real queer, that it is. . . .

And for children who're ailing and 'a' got the ague, for them to get well if you give them blood scraped off the headsman's sword, why, I've known that since I was a child, said the old man. They knew it all over the countryside and the midwife got it from the hangman's house. Isn't that so, master?

The hangman didn't see him. Didn't stir. His big, withdrawn face, under the hand that shielded it could scarcely be seen in the wavering light.

Yes. Evil has healing power, that's certain, said the old man.

Yes, it's a terrible thing the greed people have

for anything that belongs to it. As I go home past the gallows at night there's a bustle and a whispering enough to make your heart stand still with fright. It's clear enough where the apothecaries and the wise women and the other ungodly witches get their abominations from, which the poor and afflicted have to pay dearly for by the sweat of their brow. They say the're carcasses that they've plundered down to the bare bones so you can't see any longer that they were people at all when they were alive. Not but what I know as well as you that it has power and you can't do without it when there's real trouble. I've tried it myself for the matter of that, and on my old woman too—but to hell with it, I say! To hell with it! It's not only swine and the beasts of the air that live on carrion, we do the same.

Oh, give it a rest! It makes a chap sick listening to you. What was it you took, did you say?

I didn't say what it was I took and I'm not going to either. All I say is, the devil take it! For he's in everything that has to do with that, you take it from me.

Bah! You're talking rot to-night. I've had enough of your nonsense.

Why don't you drink your ale?

I'm drinking all right. Drink yourself, you old sot.

But isn't it wonderful, if that's so, that it can have such power?

Well, it has.

Yes, it's got power both ways. You're always in danger when you're near it.

They stopped talking and sat fidgeting with their pots—moved a little further off. Some of them turned away and seemed to be crossing themselves.

They say that neither knife nor sword will bite on the hangman, said the old man, with a sidelong glance at the great silent figure. How true that is I don't know.

It's a lie!

Oh, it's certain enough there's some that's 'hard.' I heard tell of one in my young days, he was hard. When he was to lose his head by the sword for his ungodly ways the edge wouldn't bite on him. Then they tried an axe but it was struck out of the hand of the man who held it, and then they were afraid and let him be, for they saw that he had powers in him.

Bosh!

It's as true as I sit here telling you!

Rot. Everyone knows that hangmen have been executed with sword and axe too just like other scum. And Master Jens, who was executed with his own broad-axe!

Yes, Jens, that was a different matter, he wasn't in league. A poor wretch like that who'd got into trouble without meaning anything by it and begged back his life because he couldn't part from

his old woman and children. That's not the same, that isn't. He couldn't stomach his trade, he was more afraid than the miserable sinner on the gallows himself. He was *afraid* of evil, he was. And he only came to a bad end afterwards because he was frightened of it that terrible, and couldn't stand it, do what he might, that's what I think, and that was why he went and did Staffan in, him that was his best friend, you know. I tell you the broad axe was stronger than him and sort of drew him to it, he couldn't resist, and one fine day he lay there in good earnest, for he knew he'd have to.

No, he'd no powers in him. But those who have, nothing will bite into them.

Yes, the hangman must have power like no one else, of course, him being that near to evil. And the broad axe and all such things have power in themselves, that's certain. That's why no one dare lay finger to it nor to anything that the hangman and his have touched.

Yes, that's true.

The're forces about that none of us can even guess at, there's no doubt about that. And evil doesn't let go if it's once got a hold.

I don't know so much, said a man who had sat without speaking the whole time. It isn't easy to get to know evil properly, and if anyone does he may find it isn't what he expected. Not that I've got hold of it very well myself, but it's sort of had me *close* to it once and let me see its face, as you

might say. You remember it all through your life, when it's bared itself to you like that. And the strange thing is that afterwards you somehow aren't afraid of it any more.

Oh . . .

Is that so? I wonder . . .

Yes. I'll tell you why I'm not afraid, if you like. It's something I remembered while you sat here talking.

It was when I was a child. I must have been five or six, I should think. We lived in a little farm that my father had and we got on well enough, we didn't go short of anything. I was the only child and I must say they thought a lot of me, a sight too much perhaps, that can easily happen when they've only one. I had a happy home and the best and fondest of parents—they're both dead now, God rest their souls. The farm lay rather on its own, away from the villages, and I got into the way of being mostly by myself or with my mother and father near the house. I still remember how the buildings lay, and the hill and the meadows and the beds of herbs under the south gable, and although it's all lost now and I daresay I shall never see it again, somehow I still carry it with me.

But one day in summer, when all the people were haymaking and mother had gone to the common with food for my father, too far for me to go with her, I stayed at home all by myself. The sun beat down and it was warm and the flies buzzed

on the doorstep and at a spot on the slope that led down to the cattle-shed where they had strained the milk that morning. I went looking about, in the orchard and in the wood yard and for a while with the bees, they were crawling slow and laden over the sill of the hive in the heat. Well, somehow or other—whether the time began to drag or what—I clambered over the stile and set off on a path into the wood, one I had only been a little way along before. Now I went further and came to a part where I didn't know my way about. The path followed a slope down and the trees were growing big and close, you looked down between the trunks and mossy overturned boulders. It led further up the valley and you could hear the rushing sound of the river that ran through our part of the country. I liked it, walking there, the summer day and everything seemed just right. The sun drowsed in the tree-tops and the woodpeckers tapped, the smell of resin hung warm and full of birds' songs.

I don't know how long I'd been walking when I heard a rustling in front of me and something behind a tangle of bushes moved and started up. I hurried ahead to get a sight of what it was. Round a bend I saw something running—I went after it. The ground got more level and the wood thinned out into an open space—then I got a glimpse of two children running. They must have been about as old as me, but they weren't dressed the same. At the other side of the clearing they stopped

and looked round. Then they ran again. I made after them, thinking, I'll catch you up all right! But they left the path and gave me the slip again and again among the bushes. At first I thought they were playing and wanted us to hide from each other, but then I realized that it couldn't be that. But I wanted to meet them and have us play together for a bit, and I went all out and gained more and more on them. At last they separated and I saw one of them crawl in and hide under a fallen fir tree. I rushed up—and there he lay crouching amongst the branches. I flung myself on him, sweating and laughing, and held him. He tried to break loose and got his head up. He had wild, scared eyes, his mouth twisted in a snarling grin. He had cropped red hair and his face was covered with little dirty pock-marks. His body was almost naked, with only a ragged woollen shift, and he lay there trembling. It felt like holding an animal.

I did think he looked a bit strange, but I didn't let go—I didn't feel any dislike for him. When he wanted to jump up again I put my knee on him and laughed at him, told him he couldn't get free. He lay quiet and looked at me and didn't say anything. But after a moment I saw that we had become friends and that he wouldn't run away. Then I let go of him and we got up together and walked along side by side, but he was watching me the whole time, I could see. The other one came

out of its hiding-place, it was his sister. He went over and whispered something to her and she listened to him with eyes wide open in her small, pale, frightened face. But when I went towards them they didn't run.

They were glad to play once we got as far as making a beginning. They hid in secret places, ones it was plain they knew about already, and when they were found they just ran silently over to another. The ground was almost flat, but with big boulders, and here and there overthrown trees; they knew everything round there, that was clear, and sometimes I didn't know where they were, for you couldn't hear them. I've never seen children playing so silently. They were eager and they darted about like little weasels, but they hardly made a sound. They said scarcely anything to me either. But we had a good time all the same, at least, so I thought. Sometimes in the middle of playing they would get together and just stand looking at me.

We must have been at it a long while when there was a call from inside the wood. They looked quickly at each other and began running away at once. I shouted that we should meet again next day, but they didn't turn round. I only heard the pattering of feet on the path.

When I got home no one was there yet. And when mother came in soon afterwards I didn't say anything about having been out and what had

happened to me. I didn't know—but it was somehow my secret.

Next day she went again with food for the hay-makers, and when I was alone I made my way there again and found my friends. They were just as timid, at least to begin with, and you couldn't tell whether they were glad I had come or not. But they were there at the same time as if they'd expected me. We played again till we were sweating all over with our silent running—for I didn't shout and yell either, as I certainly would have done any other time, because they didn't. It seemed to me as if we'd always known each other. This time we had gone where the wood opened out and I saw a little house lying close up against the mountain-side, which leaned out over it. It looked grey and rather gloomy, but we weren't very near it.

Mother had got home already when I came back and she wondered where I'd been. But I said that I'd only been into the woods for a bit.

After that I went there every day. At home they were so busy with the haymaking that I was left to myself and it was easy to slip away. The children came out a little way to meet me and they didn't seem so timid with me now.

I'd very much have liked to see what it looked like over where they lived, but it seemed as if they didn't want that. They'd rather we stayed where we used to. But one day I did venture towards the house—and they followed a little way behind.

It was all much as usual, but there were no tilled fields or plots round about, the ground lay bare and neglected and gave you a desolate feeling. The door stood ajar, and when the children had come we went a little way in through it. It was gloomy and had a musty smell. A woman came towards me without any greeting. She had hard eyes which were fixed on me the whole time, though she didn't say a word. I don't know, but there was something evil about her. Wisps of hair hung down her cheek and the great bloodless mouth had something scornful and mean about it. But it didn't really mean much to me that she looked like that. I just thought that this was their mother and then began looking round me in the room.

How has he come here? she asked the children.

He comes with us playing in the woods, they said, almost anxiously.

She looked me over, wondering, and appeared a little milder, it seemed—or maybe I'd got used to her. For a second I almost thought that she was like the girl when she first came out between the trees with her eyes wide open.

It took a while to get used to the twilight in there. I don't know—but it seemed so strange. It wasn't so vastly different from ours—and yet . . . It didn't feel at all the same there. And every home has its smell, but this was raw and heavy, like a musty coldness, perhaps because the mountain-side lay right against it.

I walked about and felt how strange it was.

Hidden away up in a corner there hung a great sword, broad and straight, edged on both sides, and on it a picture of the mother of God and the child Jesus and a lot of strange signs and inscriptions. I went up to get a nearer sight of it, never having seen anything like that before—couldn't help touching it. At that there was a deep sigh and someone gave a sob. . . .

I looked round—went over to them.

Who's crying? I said.

Crying? There's nobody crying, replied the mother.

She gave me a stare and her eyes were quite changed.

Come! she said, and gripping me hard by the hand, went back there with me, to the same place, and let me touch it again.

Then again the deep sigh was heard and someone sobbing, it was quite distinct.

The sword! she cried, and snatched me away. It's in the sword.

She let go of me and turned away. Went and stood by the stove and gave a stir to a pan she had on.

Whose child are you? she asked after a moment, and wiped her hand across her mouth. It had something evil about it, I thought, as she said it.

Kristoffer of Våla's, I replied, for that was my father's name.

Oh.

The children stood quite rigid, with wild, terrified eyes which stared straight ahead.

She went on with her work. But when she was done she drew up a stool and took me on her knee. Stroked my hair a bit.

There—, she said, and she looked long and closely at me. I'd better go with you to your father and mother, she added.

She got ready, put on another skirt and a queer cap which I'd never seen any woman wearing before. And we set out on our way.

Is it round here you come and play, she said, when we came to the wood. And afterwards too she talked a little to me now and again as we went along. When she noticed that I was afraid she took my hand.

I didn't understand anything and daren't ask anything.

When we came up the slope at home my mother rushed out on to the steps. She was quite white. I'd never seen her like that before.

What do you want with my child? Let the boy go, I tell you! Let him go, you foul wretch!

She let go of me quickly. Her face twisted, she was like a hunted beast.

What have you done to my child?

He was with us. . . .

Have you lured him into your tainted house? cried my mother.

That I haven't: He came there himself, let me tell you. And when he came up to the sword and happened to touch it there was a sighing and sobbing in it.

Mother looked uncertain and anxious at me, with hot eyes.

I expect you know what that means, don't you?

No . . . I don't.

That he'll die by the hangman's sword some day.

Mother gave a half-choked cry and stared at me. She was pale as death and her lips trembled, but she didn't answer a word.

I thought it was doing you a good turn to tell you, but instead of that you're angry. Here's your scum, and you shan't hear from us till that hour comes, since you'll have it so!

And she turned round angrily and went off.

Mother reached out for me, trembling, drew me close to her and kissed me—but her eyes were set and remote. When she'd got me into the house she rushed out. I saw her running across the fields and calling.

She and father came back silent and gloomy. I remember I stood at the window and saw them coming along the grass edge.

Nobody said a word to me. Mother began to do something over at the stove. Father walked up and down the floor, didn't sit down as he usually

did. His thin face was stiff and motionless as if there was no life in it. Once when mother was out fetching water he set me in front of him and looked into my eyes with a timid, searching glance, and then turned away again. They didn't talk to each other either. After a while father went out, wandered about on the slope without settling down to anything, just stood there and stared out.

It was a heavy, gloomy time then. I had to go about alone all day, no one seemed to care about me. Nothing was like it had been, not even the meadow lands, although it was just as fine and sunny as before. I tried to play a bit, but that wasn't any good either. When they came my way they went by without saying anything. It was as if they didn't know me. But in the evening, when mother came to put me to bed she pressed me up against her so hard that I was almost smothered.

I didn't understand why everything was so sad and changed. Even when I was glad for a while it didn't feel the same as usual. The whole farm lay desolate and silent as if no one ever spoke there. But now and again, when they thought I was out of the way, I could hear them whispering together. I didn't know what it was I'd done, only that it was something dreadful, so that they couldn't bear to see me. I tried to find things to do by myself and keep out of the way as much as I could, because I could tell they'd rather.

My mother's cheeks got sunken and she ate

nothing. Every morning you could see she'd been crying. I remember I went behind the cowshed and began to build a house just for myself out of little stones.

At last one day mother called me. Father was there too. When I came to her she took me by the hand and began walking into the wood, and father stood looking after us. When I saw that she was taking the path I used to go on, then, for the first time, I was really afraid. But everything was so miserable anyhow that I began to think things couldn't get any worse, and I just went with her. I crept up close to her and tried to walk properly on the path amongst all the stones and roots, so that I shouldn't be any trouble to her. Her face had grown so small you'd scarcely have known her.

When we got there and went up to the house she shuddered. I pressed her hand as hard as I could so that she shouldn't be so unhappy.

This time there was a man there besides the children and the woman. His body was heavy and powerful, and his face, with its thick lips, wrinkled and sort of flattened back, was covered with great scars and had a brutal, savage look, his eyes were heavy and bloodshot and all yellowish. I had never seen anything that filled me with such terror.

No one spoke. The woman went and stood by the stove and poked hard at the wood so that the sparks flew up. The man, who had looked

sidelong at us for a moment at first, turned away as well.

Mother stepped just inside the door and began humbly asking them something—it was to do with me, I could tell, but apart from that I didn't understand much of it, what it was she meant. Again and again she said there was a way, if only they would.

Nobody answered at all.

She looked so pitiful and wretched standing there that I thought no one could deny her anything. They didn't even turn round. It was as if we hadn't even been there.

It was only mother who spoke the whole time, more and more pleading and entreating, in a toneless and despairing voice. She seemed so pitiful, she said that I was her only child, and tears came into her eyes.

At last she only stood there crying—it seemed to be all no use.

I thought it was all so dreadful I didn't know what to do. I went over to the children, who had huddled up into a corner. We looked at each other, terrified. At last we sat down together on the bench by the wall, for we were so tired we couldn't keep on our feet any longer.

We sat there a long while in the dreadful silence. Suddenly I heard the man's voice and started. He stood looking across at us, but it was me he meant. Come, he said.

I crept up, trembling, and when he went out I

didn't dare but follow him. And besides mother came too. The woman turned round. She spat after her.

But the man and I went by ourselves down a well-trodden footpath which led into a little birch pasture by the house. It felt queer to be going with him and I kept a little way off all the time. But all the same we got to know each other better by walking like that. There was a spring in the middle of the copse—it must have been their well, for there was a scoop by it. He went down on his knees at the edge and got his hand full of the clear water. Drink, he said.

It wasn't hard to see that he meant me no harm. I did as he told me readily enough. I wasn't afraid at all. You'd have thought he would have looked more terrifying than ever close to, but that wasn't so; instead he seemed milder and more like ordinary people. He lay looking at me with his heavy bloodshot eyes and I remember thinking that he couldn't be happy either. Three times he made me do it.

It's lifted now, he said, now that you've drunk out of my hand. You needn't be afraid any longer. And he stroked my head a bit.

It was as if a miracle had happened!

He got up and turned back again. The sun shone and the birds twittered in the birches, there was a smell of leaves and birch bark, and up there stood mother, and her eyes shone with joy when she

saw us coming along hand in hand. She gathered me to her and kissed me.

God bless you, she said to the hangman, but he only turned away.

We went home happy.

Ah, they said, when he'd finished.

What do you make of that, eh?

Yes, it's a rum thing, evil is, who'd deny it.

It seems as if there was good in it as well.

Yes.

And what a power it has! It can bind *and* loose, you can see that.

Ah.

It's uncommon strange, I will say that.

Yes, it's a story to make you think, that it is.

I reckon your mother ought to have told the hangman's old woman she was sorry, going on at her the way she did.

Yes, so do I, but there it is, she didn't.

She didn't, eh?

They sat thinking it over for a bit. Took a swig from the pots and wiped their mouths.

Yes, the hangman may do a good turn too sometimes. We all know he's helped the sick and ailing and them that's in their direst need, when all the doctoring's come to nothing.

Yes. And he can feel suffering himself, that's true too. He takes hurt from what he does, no doubt about that. And of course we all know the way he

asks pardon of the man on the scaffold before he takes his life.

Yes, he bears no malice to them he kills, not he! He can be like he was friends with them, I've seen it myself.

Friends, I should say he can! Once when I saw them they were hanging on each other's necks as they came along!

Go on!

It's the truth, the two of them were that drunk they could hardly walk. They'd mopped up every drop that's provided, and more on top of that, and they came up to the block reeling. There wasn't much to choose, but I'd say the hangman was the furthest gone. Slosh! he said, as he chopped the head off him.

They laughed and sat drinking for a bit.

So you were to have gone to the gallows, were you? Well, well, any of us may.

Yes, no doubt about that.

But to think he's got such *power*! That's right like a miracle what you've been telling us. If he hadn't set you free you'd have been one of the lost ones now.

Yes, he works miracles, that's right enough. He's better than any saint at it.

Ah, but the saints and the Blessed Virgin work the best miracles for all that.

And Christ Jesus, who has delivered us from all sin.

Oh, we know that, you fool, but what's that got to do with it? It's the hangman we're talking about, isn't it?

Yes, there's power in him. There's power in evil, that's a fact.

But where does it get its power from? Why, from the devil, that's what I say. And that's why people are so mad for it. They're madder for that than anything else in this world, far more than they are for the word of God and the sacraments.

But he was restored, he was.

Yes, that he was, in spite of it.

Well, that may be.

And a priest wouldn't perhaps have managed it.

That he never would, for it was evil had the say in that, it was *evil* he was in the power of.

To hell with it, it's the devil's work the whole lot of it.

Wha . . .

You heard yourselves that when his mother said, 'God bless you,' then the hangman turned away.

Ah, that's bad. . . .

Oh, blast it, let's have a drink! Don't sit here talking of such things.

Come on here with the ale! More ale, I say! And let's have it strong!

See you get it out of the right cask. No . . . not the one with the thief-finger. . . . Is it true you've got thief-finger in your ale?

The girl went pale and shook her head, stammered out something.

Oh yes, you have—the whole town knows it. Come on, bring it over here. That doesn't matter a damn as long as it's strong. Slosh! as he said.

That's enough of your sloshing. You never know when you won't have a neck left to drink yourself drunk through.

Best take my chance while I've got it!

It's the devil himself brewed this, you can tell by the taste.

Yes, it's a hell-hole this, but you get the best ale here.

They drank. Sprawled with their elbows across the table.

I'm wondering, said the old cobbler, if there'll be business on the gallows hill to-morrow morning. Reckon there will?

Ah . . .

Like enough. . . .

Yes, I mean because the hangman's about. And got up so fine in his best red dress.

Yes. . . . It looks like it. . . .

But you haven't heard of anyone for the gallows, have you?

No. . . .

Well, well. We shall hear when the drum goes.

Oh, have a drink, old 'un! Don't sit there talking rot.

They drank,

A young man came in with a couple of women.

There, look at that, the whores are coming now.

Yes, wherever the hangman goes, there his brood comes too.

Let's have a light so we can take a look at those drabs of yours, boy!

They're pretty bits. Get them at the bawdy house?

No need to ask that.

Won't you sit down with master hangman here? Are you afraid?

Ah, well, well . . . You know him too well perhaps.

Here, you ladies, have you been out on the gallows hill? There's a man hanging there as they stripped all the clothes off last night, till there isn't a stitch left on the whole of his body, and all the wondrous work of the Lord stands there to be seen. You see enough of that, eh? Well, well, but the womenfolk have been going on pilgrimage there ever since this morning to behold the glorious sight, for the gallows folk have the properest manly parts, so they say. What are you grinning at? You look out for the hangman!

Haven't you had a whipping at the post from him yet?

Oh, that's happened sure enough, and the stocks must fit 'em like a glove.

One fine day he'll whip you out of the town

and you'll have to look sharp then if you're to save your pretty backsides!

One of the women turned on them.

You hold your tongue, Skinner Jockum. Go home to your old woman. She whores just as much as us and only last night she was with us at the house hiring herself out, because she's served so badly at home, she said.

None of your lip. And if you think it's news to me, that's where you're wrong. I know all about her goings on! But I'll flay her alive, that I will!

As if that would stop her!

I'll do her in before I've finished, that's about it.

She'll like that all the better, she can go a-whoring with the devil himself then!

He sat muttering to himself and they had a good laugh at him.

No, there's no punishing women, not in this world or the next.

Why, but they're burnt and drowned like the rest of us, and beheaded too, it seems to me.

Yes, the hangman has no mercy on them.

Not he.

Why, watching hangmen, you must have seen often enough that they liked it best when it was a woman.

Yes, you can well believe that!

It's sweeter then than it is with mere menfolk, of course.

So it is.

It isn't every time they like it. Not always. I was there once when he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Go on!

No, he wasn't up to it; he was carried away with her on the very scaffold.

No!

He was?

Yes. We could all see he was taken with love for her. He just stood and gazed at her and hadn't even strength to lift the axe!

Yes, she was fine to look at too. I remember the long black hair she had, and her eyes were dangerous too, mild and frightened to death and wet like an animal's. I can see her face even to-day, it was that uncommon and handsome. No one knew her very well, she was a strange woman who'd only just come to the town, and he'd never seen her before. No, it was nothing to marvel at that he was so taken with her. He was pale and his hand was shaking. 'I can't,' he said, loud enough for those who were nearest to hear quite easily.

No? . . . Good Lord.

Yes, it was a strange sight, that it was. And when the people saw love in his eye they were touched and began to whisper and talk about it among themselves, and you could see they thought it was hard luck on him.

Yes, you can understand that.

Yes. And when he stood like that for a while

he laid down his axe and went up and gave her his hand. And then the tears came into her eyes and it seemed as if love had taken hold of her too, and there was nothing surprising in that, seeing what he did and how they stood there, and that he had got to be her executioner too.

No.

But what was the end of it then?

Why, he went up before the judge and all the people and proclaimed that he was ready to take her to wife—and then if they want, you know, they can grant pardon. And the people began to show that they were willing to see her pardoned. And the judge and all of them found this marvellous power of love on the very scaffold an edifying sight, and many of them were crying at it. So that was what they did. And the priest joined them, and married they were.

But she had the gallows mark burnt in, for that's the law, of course, and the gallows must have its dues. But with that, as I say, she was let off.

Well, that was rare wonderful.

Yes, sure enough.

What was it like for them afterwards? There couldn't be any real happiness in it, could there?

Why, yes. They had the happiest time there in the hangman's house, all the neighbours testified to that. They'd never had such a hangman, they said, being in love changed him, I suppose. He wasn't like that before, not he, and they carried on

quite differently in the house, not like it was before when all kinds of scum hung out there as they always do, of course. I often saw them together while she was big with child and they were like any other lovers, and she was just as fine to look at, although she had to wear the outcast's cap as the wife of the hangman, and the ugly mark on her forehead, of course, but, as I say, she was handsome all the same.

When she was to bear the child they were trying to get a midwife like everyone else, for they seem to have been looking forward to that child just like ordinary people, so it was said, anyhow. But they didn't get anyone, I remember that, because they were after an old woman who lived in the house opposite ours. They were set on having her, because they were afraid it might turn out badly when the time came, but she wouldn't, and no one else either, of course, for they were bound to be full of wickedness when all's said and done.

I don't call that a Christian act, though, denying them that.

But that sort of thing carries a taint, you know, and then she might go and help an honest woman afterwards!

Yes, that's true.

Yes, so naturally she had to lie there alone, for he didn't happen to be there either when the time came, it was so sudden, and perhaps that wasn't too good, you know. Anyhow, nobody knows anything about it for certain or how it really happened,

but she confessed to the court afterwards that she had strangled the child.

What! She didn't?

How could she do a thing like that?

Well, she seems to have said that when she'd borne it and got enough strength back to tend it a little and wipe away the blood from its face, she saw that it had a birth-mark on its forehead, and it was the gallows too. They'd branded her, you see, and at the time when she'd conceived the child, of course, and it had burnt and hurt her so much, she said. And she didn't want the child to live in this world, she said, so I've been told, and how it had already set its mark on it already, and how she'd loved it so much, and a lot more of it, it was all mixed up, what she said, so I heard, and of course she was born to crime, poor wretch, that's clear enough.

Damn shame, it seems to me.

Yes, that it was.

Yes, so she was condemned to be buried alive, for it was no small crime she'd got on her conscience in the end, and he himself had to fill in the grave. I was there then, as it happened, and watched it, and it wasn't easy for him, of course, for he had loved her right enough, that's certain, even if he couldn't now very well after the dreadful thing she'd done. He looked at her fine body as it disappeared under the spadefuls of earth, and he left the face as long as he could. She didn't utter a word the whole time.

I suppose they'd said good-bye to each other beforehand, but she lay watching him with love in her eyes. When at last he had to throw earth over her face too, he turned away. No, it wasn't easy for him. But there, he had to do it, that was the sentence.

They said he'd been there later on that night and tried to dig her up again, in the hope she might still be alive, but that was only talk, he must have realized she couldn't be, of course.

He left those parts soon afterwards, by the way, and no one knew what became of him.

Ah, well, well. That was a rare shame.

But they might have known they had no chance and the child would be wicked like them.

Yes; nothing to wonder at in a gallows mark being on it.

No, that sticks fast, that does.

True enough.

No, no. There's no escaping it. No chance of that.

So he was her executioner in the end all the same.

Yes, so he was.

Yes, it must have been meant like that after all.

There was an uproar and shouting outside the door. A man came lurching in, yelling at somebody who was coming along behind him in the darkness, and threatening him with an arm that had had the hand cut off.

It's a lie, you lousy yokel! You counted the throw yourself, and it was right, wasn't it, heh?

But you'd got loaded dice, you thief!

To hell with that! Were they, eh, Jocke?

No, not them, not on your life, answered a half-grown boy who was following the handless man close at heel.

Yes, that young devil, he's in with you at your thieves' tricks, it's him plays false for you, you lousy cripple, you can't hold the cards or anything else yourself! They were marked, that they were, or you'd never have played me out of everything!

Oh, shut up, bumpkin! He sat down at the table and looked furtively about him. When he saw the hangman his face twitched. It was thin and hollow and his eyes shone feverishly. The boy stole up to him on the bench.

Hullo. Gallows Lasse out to-night, eh!

What, you afraid to sit near the hangman too, Lasse?

Hold your row!

He came forward sullenly, sat down at the far end of the table. The boy stole after.

Yes, that's where you belong, you filth! shouted the farmer. He'll soon get the rest of you!

Yes, it's bound to be the gallows next time, Lasse boy. There's no more of you for them to cut off now.

Bloody fools' talk, you've no more sense. No gallows is going to get me.

Well, well . . .

You don't think so, eh . . . ?

He hitched forward with a shrug of his shoulders. Ale! he called to the girl, and she hurried up with it. The boy held the pot up to his mouth for him and he swilled down gulp after gulp at one draught. When he had to draw breath the boy waited and gave it him again.

Cheat, you say! . . . He turned slowly round towards the farmer who had sat down somewhere near the door.

Yes, that's what I said.

Do you think I have to cheat to get away with your miserable fool's ha'pence! They drop straight into my purse, they can't stand the stink of your breeches!

You shut your mouth!

They laughed at the farmer, he couldn't hit on any really foul words.

Oh no, Gallows Lasse doesn't need to mark cards or put lead in the dice, if it doesn't suit him.

No, things like that aren't a patch on what he can do. You don't stand a chance against him, old chap!

I daresay he has the same thieves' tricks as the others. I don't see how you can keep it up, Lasse, the sight they've made of you.

Don't you worry about that. Trust Lasse to get away with it!

You can be sure of that. . . .

I remember when they had my fingers off, when I was about like him, he said, pointing to the boy, and nailed them to the stocks. Ha! I was there myself and had a good laugh at them stuck up there. Well, here are your thief's fingers, they said. But I just laughed, told them I didn't give a damn. Lasse will always get away with it, I said. And so he did!

He screwed up his eyes tight several times and his face twitched. Nudged the boy with his stump of an arm to be given more ale. The boy hurried eagerly to give him the pot. He had a little quick face and his eyes danced in his head. He followed everything keenly.

Well, now, but when they began to have your hands off, that was something different!

Bah, what was that to me!

He wiped off the ale with his sleeve.

The old cobbler at the other end of the table sprawled forward: Do you know that he has the mandrake? he whispered, hissing with excitement.

No, I don't give a damn, said Gallows Lasse, loudly and distinctly. I'm all right. And then I've got the boy. He's quick at getting to know the ropes.

Yes, I daresay.

The boy blinked, gratified with the praise.

Is he your son, Lasse?

Sure I don't know, but upon my soul I almost

think he is, he seems to be taking after me so much.

Oh, you don't know.

No. Hanna the Whore is mother to him anyhow, but he's left her because he got beatings there and nothing to eat, and he goes with me, because I'm going to give him an idea or two about the things you need in the world. You never saw anyone so teachable.

Am I your father, Jocke?

Oh, what docs that matter? sniggered the boy.

No, you're right there. It's all one. But he has a good time with me, you know. Eh, Jocke?

Yes, grinned the boy.

Don't tell me you can get along with just that little snot. I'll never believe that.

You won't, eh?

No, you must have stronger powers than that to help you, you must.

Why, what sort of powers?

Don't ask me.

I should think not. Don't talk rot then.

They kept quiet for a while. Sat there fidgeting with their pots.

It isn't true that you've got the mandrake, is it?

Oh, shut your mouth. . . .

No. How could you have pulled it up, the state you're in.

In the gloom a flicker darted from his feverish eyes and the thin face shrunk.

Oh, Lasse's a match for more than that if need be.

Yes, that's like enough.

But to pull it up on the gallows hill isn't so easy. And not having any hands too.

No. And knowing that you're doomed when you hear the shriek!

They stole a glance at him. His head gave a violent jerk; his body began twitching.

Oh, he's got it, I tell you, and a lot more too! It's my belief you were sold to the devil long ago, Lasse!

All right, then!

Didn't I say so?

There, did you hear that?

Don't they ride you at night, then, the ghosts and demons?

Huh! . . . Not when you're best friends with the devil himself. Then you can sleep as sweet as a suckling.

Aw, you're bragging now, Lasse!

Not half! You're piling it on now! If it was like that you wouldn't need to go about in the world crippled the way you are.

The hangman must have thought you belonged to him, not the devil, the mess he's made of you!

They laughed at their witticisms. The hot eyes gleamed venomously at them.

Think I care?

Not you!

Seems to me they've treated you like any other gallows fodder.

What about it? They won't do for Gallows Lasse that way.

He spoke shrilly and scowled at them. Don't you believe it! That's not so easy, let me tell you.

Oh, isn't it? Well, they've made a good beginning anyhow!

They've had no power to rob me of anything! he shouted, and got to his feet. Not they—that they haven't! There's no human power can get the better of me, let me tell you!

Listen to that! that's the best of all.

Not on your life! What I have, no power in the world can take from me. And the boy here's going to have it after me.

What? Have you things to leave too, Lasse? Did you hear that, eh?

Yes, I have! A sight more than any of you! He'll inherit the mandrake and the whole stock of hell after me!

You have got the mandrake then?

Yes, you can bet your soul on that. Do you want to see it, eh?

No, no . . .!

I've got it here round my neck. It's shaped like a man, so you can steal and do what you like and everything comes to hand, even if you haven't got hands.

They gaped. Looked at him with horror.

How were you able to come by it, a miserable devil like you? On the gallows hill?

How else! Under the gallows itself, of course, where they dig in the hanged when they've blown down.

Durst you go there? At night?

Of course I durst. But it wasn't like being at home with mother and saying Our Father in bed. You'd never have dared, you wouldn't.

No, no. . . .

They sighed and groaned so it was horrible to hear. . . .

Who?

The dead, of course, you fool! And rose up and grabbed hold of me while I was hunting for it. I tell you they did! I had to strike out at them as hard as I could, and they moaned and whined like the madmen in bedlam when the hangman's man beats them to calm them down! There was a groaning and a howling as if it were hell itself. I thought I should go out of my senses—I couldn't keep them off. Away with you! I yelled at them, the foul ghosts. Away with you spectres! I'm not dead. I'm alive and I must have it! And at last I managed to keep them off a bit. And then I saw it growing right under the gallows, where Petter the butcher and a few more were hanging. I cleared away the earth round it a little with the stump of one arm and then lay down and tore at it with my teeth.

No! You did that!

Yes, that I did! That's what they use the dogs for, them that daren't do it themselves!

His eyes stood out hot and wild in his face.

And then it gave the shriek! It shrieked! It shrieked! enough to freeze your blood! But I had nothing in my ears, not I! Not like the other cowards. I could stand it—and I tugged and tugged at the root! It smelt of death and blood and corruption! It roared and howled from hell! But I didn't stop my ears, not I! I just tore and tore. I *would* have it!

He raged as if he were possessed. They shrank back from him.

And when I got it up there came a crash all round me, rumbling and trembling! The abyss opened and blood and corpses flooded up! The darkness was rent and poured out fire over the world—horror and wailing—and everything burning! It was like hell let loose on earth!

Now I've got it! now I've got it! I shouted.

He stood up and shook the stumps of his arms above his head, like a hideous mutilated phantom. His wild glare seemed to be shattered and his voice had lost all human sound.

I have things to leave, I have! I have things to leave! You can bet your soul on that!

The hangman sat motionless, staring before him, heavy and timeless, out into the gloom.

More people had been coming in, there was a hum and a stir, voices and laughter and tinkling of glasses sounded out of the half-dark, the globe up in the ceiling turned slowly and threw a dim blue-violet and greenish light, dancers were gliding over the floor somewhere in the middle and the band played softly.

Dancing went on out into the gangways between the tables, spread over the whole place, women in light dresses hung on the men with half-shut eyes, the band throbbed its jazz.

A handsome, well-developed woman glided past, looking back over her partner's shoulder.

It's never the hangman here, she said. How interesting!

The light played over the throng, the tables gleamed pallid and deathly green, the waiters ran sweating through the hum and the shouts of laughter, champagne corks popped.

A fat gentleman with a bulging shirt-front came up and bowed politely.

It's a great honour for us to have the hangman amongst us, he said, and washed his hands blandly, pressed back his pince-nez over his little stinging gaze.

The dance came to an end and the couples dispersed, sat down at the tables, smiling.

Did you know the hangman was here?

No, really!

Yes, he's sitting over there.

Some style, eh?

A young man with an energetic childish face stepped in front of him and stood at attention with his arm raised high in the air. Hail! he said, and stood a moment, rigid. Turned round, clicked his heels again, went back to his place.

They chattered and laughed. A man in torn clothes came in and went round whispering something at the tables, his thin hand outstretched, till he was put out. The whores sat sipping at their glasses.

Doesn't he look marvellous in that red affair?

Yes, doesn't he?

And doesn't he look strong and rough!

I reckon he looks like a pimp.

What! You must be crazy. He's a marvellous chap.

What's he sit with his hand on his forehead for all the time?

God, how should I know!

He's marvellous.

Isn't he?

What's it like, should you think, with a hangman?

Oh, it would be thrilling, you bet.

The music started again, languorous now, it was another orchestra playing. The couples glided out into the swimming blue light, the slim arms

hung over the shoulders and the eyes closed, half asleep.

Is there going to be something special tomorrow, then?

I don't know, but they seem to have a lot of people they want to kill off. Well, let them.

Yes, no harm in that. There's plenty enough people in the world, law-abiding, respectable ones too. It's always the best who're left, anyhow; they see to that.

Naturally.

An elderly military-looking gentleman with a spluttering mouth and firm, strutting gait went by the hangman's table.

Excellent that we're getting a little order, sir! People have got to learn where they belong, confound them!

What's this? We ordered *sec* and here you bring us *demi-sec*. What do you think you're doing?

Very sorry, sir. . . .

I should think you are. What service! And after we've been waiting ages.

And he's opened it already!

Well, you'll have to change it. We never drink anything but *sec*.

A complacent, well-fed woman who had been out in the ladies' cloakroom waddled by. When she caught sight of the hangman she clapped her hands together.

Why, dear me! The hangman's here! I really must tell Herbert this!

She went up and laid her hand familiarly on the hangman's arm.

I'm sure my son will be frightfully pleased to meet you. He's such an admirer of bloodshed, the dear child!

She got up and looked round in a motherly way for her *ménage*.

The music went on languorously, caressed the slim, gliding bodies of the women, and a dirty little urchin slipped in through the swing doors and opened his tattered rags at table after table to show that he was naked underneath, till the waiters caught him.

On the contrary, sir! Violence is the highest expression not only of the physical but even of the spiritual forces of mankind! This is a fact which has at last, thanks to us, become perfectly evident. And those who think otherwise we shall convince precisely by the use of this violence, and they'll certainly believe in it then. Don't you agree?

Yes, of course, certainly.

Yes! We hope so too.

As I said. We are going to make it an imperative demand that all non-adherents are castrated. That is a simple necessity to confirm the triumph of our ideas. You couldn't expect us to let the plague spread to coming generations. No, sir! We feel our responsibility.

Yes, of course.

But, my dear sir, you are still so ridiculously shut up in the conventional ideas of the past. You see, there'll never *be* any other philosophy than ours. All that's over now, you see.

Really, is that so? I begin to see your point now. Exactly. Yes, of course.

Yes, as soon as you get away from the ordinary lines of thinking you begin to grasp our completely new way of looking at things. It's only in the beginning that it's a bit difficult. But really at bottom it's so simple.

Yes, just so.

Have you ever been at a proper flogging of recalcitrants like we have down at our place? It's really the most inspiring spectacle you could witness, I assure you. You feel as if you were helping to educate mankind for a higher life, ennobling it.

Yes, I should like to see that.

Why, at times we've even managed to convert old men getting on for eighty if we've kept at it long enough.

Really, that's incredible. And when you think how hard it is in the ordinary way to spread real conviction among people.

Yes! I assure you, we certainly are getting unique results.

But we feel our responsibility towards *all* coming generations, you see. We know that this is the crucial moment! If only there's right thinking now,

then thinking will never go wrong at any time again. We mustn't forget that we're living in a great age! An age which is decisive for the whole of mankind and for the further development of existence on the earth.

Yes, exactly.

We are responsible for it; we know that.

Classes! There are no classes any more! That's precisely what's so magnificent and remarkable in what's happened. There are only those who think like us and a few shut up who're just being taught to think like us. And those that are left of them will be certain to have learnt it.

You see yourself—here we all sit drinking champagne or, like most of us perhaps, just a simple glass of beer, professional people, working people, and those a bit better off, all together, all are the same. And all think exactly the same—like us! All who are at large think like us!

Yes, yes.

At last you have before you the glorious, unique sight of a people brought together in unity! One, moreover, that the deluded will soon be joining, no question of it: As for the stubborn ones, we shall know how to bring them to heel! A people gathered together in faith outside its prisons, waiting to hear the shriek of someone who's converted.

How moving! What a spirit!

Yes, the world has never witnessed the like of

it! It's as if they'd all gathered for worship and many of them stand at attention while they wait for the groaning of the converted, they feel such a reverence for what is happening to their race in the hidden places. Really it's a sublime spectacle. Such a thing is only conceivable amongst us. We are like no other people on the earth. Not in the very least!

No, it's absolutely essential for us to get a god for ourselves, and quickly, what's more. You can't expect our people to worship a god who's used by other, inferior races as well. Ours is a very religious people, but it demands a god for itself! The conception of a common god is an open expression of contempt for our whole philosophy, and it will be punished in the way we have for all crimes these days.

A ruffianly individual slunk through the dim room begging with an insolent leer, knocking against the tables so that the glasses slopped over when he didn't get anything.

One party had got a table over in a corner:

Damn it all! Didn't we order beer and sausages and here you're bringing champagne. What the hell's the idea! Do you think we're millionaires, heh, like these bloody swine here!

I'm sorry, I thought you gentlemen belonged to the upper classes. . . .

Did you, hell! You keep your eyes open next time, or you'll damn soon get one on the jaw—perhaps you'll wake up then!

A soldier came lurching in and sat down by the hangman and began to run on at him.

What sort of a stuffed dummy do you think you are! . . . Why aren't you in field-grey, heh? . . . Look at him! . . .

Hush . . . whispered someone close by, can't you see it's the hangman. . . .

I can see that all right! But he looks so damn silly! . . . That what you call a hangman, heh! Bah, what's the good of him! No, it's got to be machine-guns! and hand grenades! . . . that's the stuff, you bet! You don't know your trade, anyone can see that!

Don't talk nonsense. Of course he does—better than you. You should keep yourself in hand, young fellow. Can't you see you're both in the same game, you and he?

Yes, but I say he ought to use machine-guns . . . good modern stuff, you know . . . that's the way to get a move on. . . . You should be in field-grey, man.

You've talked big enough, young 'un. You haven't seen as much fighting as my piss-pot, anyone can hear that.

I'm going to, though. You bet your life. And it'll be the devil of a war too.

Yes, with you in it.

Yes, me and the other boys! They know the job, I tell you. And they aren't afraid to do it.

Well said, my boy.

The boy's all right, only had a bit too much beer for his young head to-night. It's magnificent that we have youth like that in the country. It touches an old man. . . .

You're sloppy, you old fools . . . you've lost your grip on things. . . . Here's to you, hangman. You're just my sort. We'll put the world right between us, anyhow. . . . Why don't you drink? What a miserable blighter. Unhappy are you, heh?

Over at another table they were laughing till the guests and waiters turned round; a young woman was doubled up.

Of course we must have war. War is health! A people that doesn't want war is sick!

Yes, peace is something for babes in arms and the sick, they need peace. But not a healthy, full-grown man.

A trench is the only place where a decent man can feel at home. We ought to live in trenches in peace-time too and not in houses, that only makes people namby-pamby.

Yes, the iron tonic of war is something we must have. A robust people can't do without it for more than ten years at the most. Then it begins to degenerate—if it's healthy, that is to say.

Yes. And the one who ends a war is a traitor. Of course.

Down with the traitors! Down with the traitors! Death to them!

Yes, even if he wins. Because in any case he

throws his people without a scruple into all the uncertainty of peace. You know where you are with a war, but a people at peace is menaced by all sorts of unknown dangers.

Yes, that's true.

Yes, we must get away from this disastrous effeminacy! Children must be brought up to war. When they learn to walk they must learn the military way, not their mother's.

Oh, we're looking after that. We take charge of the children, we don't leave them to irresponsible parents.

Of course not.

Which means that the future can be regarded as assured.

Yes.

I heard you talking about war, friends, said a man with his face shot away so that only the lower part was left and the rest was a red scaly surface; he got up unsteadily from his chair. It warms my heart! I hope it will be granted me to see the day when our people march out again to the old, proud battlefields. And that modern science will by then have advanced so far that even I can join in. They've been reading to me from a recent book that they think they'll get to the point where you'll be able to see, and consequently aim, direct from the soul. If so, you'll find me in the front line and with a sure eye—for my soul, friends, my soul remains perfectly sound!

Bravo! Bravo!

That was noble!

Magnificent!

It's only in a great age you get men of that kidney!

Yes, as someone has said, war stamps the sign of nobility on a man's forehead. You can see that!

It's glorious!

What a race! It's unconquerable!

Yes, there's no doubt we must spread our doctrine over the whole world. It would be outrageous to keep a thing like that to ourselves. And if any nation won't accept it we shall exterminate them.

Of course. For their own sake. It's a happier lot for a nation to be exterminated than to live without having part with us!

Of course.

The world will come to thank us once it's grasped what we mean.

Yes, it's essential that after a time mankind should pull down what it has built up! Otherwise it lacks the proper childlike spirit. And the pulling down is more important than the simple, purely mechanical building up. Those are the great, proud ages! There will always be the little persevering drudges who build up the world, you needn't worry your head about that. But the audacious spirits who with one sweep wipe out mankind's little toy world so that you can begin

from the beginning again, those are rare, they only come when we deserve them.

Yes, our people is sound all through! That's why it has the moral courage to declare openly that it loves what others call oppression. It's only effeminate, degenerate races who try to escape that. All strong nations like having the whip over them—get on perfectly with it!

Yes, no question of it. Can you see anything more inspiring than youth in our ranks! We build upon youth! Brave, unsentimental modern youth! Everywhere it takes our side, the winning side! Young heroes. . . .!

To think they dare!

Did someone speak? . . .

Ah, I was mistaken.

There was a stir over by the entrance where people were whispering and beginning to get to their feet, raising their hands. All eyes turned in that direction. A murmur ran through the room.

Hail! The assassins! Hail! The assassins!

Two well-dressed young men with pleasant, rather ordinary looks came up the gangway between the rows of hands, smiling affable thanks to right and left. Every one in the place stood up, the dance band stopped and the more select orchestra struck up an anthem instead which they listened to at attention. Meanwhile three waiters hurried noiselessly up to the newcomers and a head waiter who came behind overturned a table with beer mugs

and a decanter of red wine over some ladies, who brushed aside his hasty excuses with eager whispers, while he rushed on. It was crowded, but one of the parties was breaking up to go home and the young men took over their table and sat down.

Damn it! You can't go anywhere without being recognized at once.

No, curse it, said the other, blowing out the smoke from his cigarette, and stretching his legs out under the table while they waited for what they had ordered. I find this begins to be rather a strain.

Yes, if we'd known it would be such a bore to be assassins I think we should never have shot that man. He seems to have been a decent sort of fellow too, as it turned out.

Yes, but it was clear enough from his body that he wasn't one of us.

No, of course. With a body like that!

The negro band started up its jazz again and a thin woman with a child in a shawl went through the restaurant without any of the staff even noticing her, so that after a while she made her own way out again.

Coming to shift corpses to-night?

Shift corpses?

Yes, some of the traitors to the new philosophy, we're going to shift them out of the churchyard into a bog that'll be more their style.

Ugh. . . .

Ugh? Don't you want to?

I don't know. . . . Funny sort of idea, isn't it?
Idea? It's the idea of our movement, com-

rade!

Ugh . . . but they were dead before we began.

What of that!

No, that seems rotten to me.

What do you mean, you *won't!* You *refuse!*

Refuse? I'm only saying it seems to me to be going too far.

Too far! You think it's silly, perhaps?

No, not that exactly.

Look here, what are you really driving at?
Let's have it!

What am I driving at? . . . Let go of me—
what the devil's up?

Do you refuse to obey orders? Setting up little
ideas of your own, eh?

Let go of me, I say!

No, you don't get away so easily here!

Let me go, you devils!

Hear what he called us?

You bastard! You refuse? . . . You're going
to desert?

I haven't refused!

Oh yes, you have!

Oh, that's enough! Don't stand there bickering
with a deserter!

There was a report and the sound of a heavy
thud.

Carry the carcass out.

No, let him lie, he won't be in the way.

The jazz jangled on, a young girl's head turned on a slender neck.

Did something happen? she asked.

I suppose they shot someone.

Oh!

A party was sitting at a table in an out-of-the-way corner.

Do you know what I think's going to happen to-morrow, what they're talking so much about?

No?

Well, something very different from what these snots imagine.

What?

Ah! . . .

He rolled a cigarette and lit it from one of the others, spat out the shreds.

We can press a trigger all right, too, when it comes to it. God knows it was us who taught them most of their tricks anyhow—if there was any need of teaching.

Oh, they all take naturally to it nowadays.

That's so.

Be fine to have another go at cleaning up humanity. It's needed right enough.

Yes. I wouldn't mind taking a hand in it.

A young woman came and sat down quietly by the hangman. She looked like a beggar, but when she threw the shawl back from her head her face shone with a strangely fine light. She laid her hand

gently on his and he turned to her—she seemed to be the only one he had looked at the whole time.

The music changed, the smarter orchestra at the other end played a languid tango based on an old classical melody. There was a calm, pleasant atmosphere in the room, but it happened that a man had to go out to the lavatory. When he came back he saw the negroes sitting at a table behind their platform, hastily gobbling a sandwich. He grew red in the face and went up to them.

How dare you do that, you swine? Sitting eating among white people!

They turned round in surprise. The nearest got half out of his chair and said: What? What do you mean, sir? . . .

What do I mean? How dare you eat here, you dirty ape?

The black jumped up like a spring and there was a flash in his eyes, but he daren't do anything.

Here, gentlemen! Here! he shouted angrily across the room, and the people came hurrying over, crushed round him and the negroes. Did you ever see anything like it? It's outrageous! These apes eating among us!

There was a violent uproar. What insolence! Intolerable! Do you take this for a monkey-house? Does it look like it?

We've got to eat like other creatures after all! said one of the negroes.

But not among people, you dog!

Eat! You're here to *play*! Not to eat!

You have the honour to play for us, because we happen to be attracted by your music! But you'd better remember your place, unless you want to be lynched! Get that!

Up on to the platform.

Well! What are you waiting for?

The blacks showed no sign of obeying the order.

This is passive resistance undisguised, gentlemen! said a handsome, distinguished-looking man.

Well! What's stopping you?

Jump to it! Up on to the platform!

We're hungry! We must have food if we're to play!

Hungry! Listen to that!

Yes, we must! And we've got a right to it! said a big giant, and scowled menacingly.

Right! Have you got rights, you? What the hell next?

Yes, I have! said the black, stepping nearer.

What! Answer a white man that way, you lout! He struck him full in the face.

The negro flinched and crouched back, stood trembling like an animal, then made a lightning leap and gave him a punch that knocked him backwards his full length.

The tumult was indescribable. Everyone rushed to the spot, the whole place was roused to wild excitement. The blacks drew together into a bunch, huddled and alert, with bloodshot eyes and white

teeth bared, like some strange new beast in the human jungle. A shot was fired and one from the bunch rushed yelling and bloody out among the whites, striking furiously around him. The others followed, howling, but they were held back by the revolvers. Shots rattled the whole time, and they crouched down, bleeding, behind chairs and tables.

Will you play, heh? shouted a pleasant, fair young man, letting off his Browning at their hiding-place.

No! yelled the blacks.

After all, we have got another band! cried someone, trying to calm things down a bit. There is another!

To hell with that sentimental rot! These are the ones who've got to play! Get up, you apes!

They drove them up out of their refuges and the tumult began again, worse than before. It was a wild pandemonium. Things whirled through the air, murderous projectiles; the whores stood on chairs, shrieking. The negroes were being hunted all over the room.

No, damn it! After all, we are civilized . . .!

What! Say that again and I'll shoot you down!

Civilization be blasted!

A giant of a black, the one with the punch, perhaps, was running amok in the restaurant, kicking down everything in his way and dealing murderous knockouts right and left, till he was felled by a well-aimed shot, clutched at his breast

and slumped down with a wide, empty grin on his lips. The rest gathered their scattered forces, seized chairs for weapons, splitting the skulls of any they could get at. They fought in blind fury, hate shining in the whites of their eyes, till they dropped.

You bite, do you, you slinking cur! bawled a uniformed warrior at a half-dead black who was lying on the ground with the man's leg in his jaws, and he turned the muzzle downwards and sent him a bullet. The blacks uttered war-cries, weird and terrible as if from the jungle, but the whites didn't let it unnerve them, managed to hold them at bay with nothing but their weapons, the revolvers rattled like machine-guns. It was all a raging mêlée.

The two young murderers took no part, they just sat enjoying it, they'd done their bit.

At last the remaining negroes were driven up into a corner and hemmed in. They could no longer make a stand, had to give up unconditionally.

So that's done! the whites panted out.

Up on to the platform!

The blacks were driven up on to it and forced to pick up their instruments.

A powerful man in a dinner-jacket sat astride a chair right in front of them, with his revolver turned on them.

Those who don't play I pick off! he said.

And the negroes played. Madly, with blood-shot eyes and hands and faces covered with blood, wild, unearthly music. It was a music never heard

before, frantic, terrifying, like nocturnal howlings from the jungle and the din of the death-drum when the tribes gather in the forest after sunset. A gigantic negro stood right in front, with clenched teeth, beating his frenzied drum swirls as if he were possessed, blood streaming down his throat from a gaping wound in his head and his rent shirt gleaming red. He beat and beat with his powerful bloody fists, and the other instruments joined in, it was like one inarticulate howl.

Splendid! Magnificent! The whites danced, skipping and scurrying to the music. There was dancing everywhere, over the whole vast room—a witches' cauldron seething in choppy waves. Faces were glowing from the battle and the heat of the room, damp with the sour smell of bodies, the dying groaned between the tables, they were kicked aside by the jazzing couples. The globe revolved in the ceiling, flinging its many-coloured light over the rank brew. The women shone with desire and beauty, casting hot glances at the big bleeding negroes, and thrust their legs between their partners', the men pressed themselves vigorously against their thighs, roused by the glances and the warm revolver that hung dangling behind them like an extra, reeking phallus. It was all wonderfully spirited.

One man, fiery red with enthusiasm, his collar torn in the fight, leapt up on to a table over by the hangman and flourished his Browning in the air.

Victory is ours, comrades! No use anyone

setting himself up against us! Order! Discipline! In these signs we triumph! On these we build our power in the world!

He flung his arms about, shouting; the people gathered round to hear.

And on this proud day when we have asserted the superiority of our race over all others we have the good fortune and pleasure to see amongst us the representative of what we place highest of all in life! The hangman is here among us! We are proud to have him here, for it shows, if we hadn't known it before, that we live in a great age! That the days of dishonour and effeminacy are past and a new morning dawns for mankind! His mighty form fills us with assurance and courage! He shall lead us—the only one we mean to follow!

We hail you, our leader, with the holy emblems, the symbols of all that is holiest and most precious in life for us, all that is to bring about a new era in the history of mankind! Blood is the colour of mankind! And we know that we are worthy of you! We know that you can rely on us when we acclaim you with our rapturous: Hail! Hail!

He jumped down from the table, red and panting, and went up to his hero.

The hangman looked at him without lifting his head, didn't move, and made no answer.

The fiery gentleman seemed a little disconcerted at that, didn't quite know how to go on.

Hail! he cried again a little undecidedly, with his arm in the air, and all who stood round did the same.

The hangman looked at them without a word.

But . . . but you are the hangman, aren't you? they asked uncertainly.

He whom they addressed lowered his hand from his forehead where the mark of the hangman was burnt in—a stir of enthusiasm ran through the crowd.

Yes, I am the hangman! he said. And he got up, big and terrifying in his blood-red dress. Every eye was turned on him, and it grew so quiet in the room after the howling din that you could hear the sound of his breathing.

Since the dawn of the ages I have performed my task and I'm not likely to see the end of it for some time yet. Thousands of years slip by, nations rise up and nations vanish again in the night, but I remain after them all and look back, bloodstained, on them, I, the only one who doesn't age. I follow loyally in the way of mankind, and no path that they have trodden is so secret that I have not raised a reeking pyre by it and moistened the earth there with blood. I was with you from the beginning and I shall follow you till your time is out. When first you raised your eyes to heaven and began to sense god I ripped open a brother for you and offered him up. I still remember the windy trees and the firelight flickering over your faces when I

tore out his heart and cast it to the flames. Since then I have offered up many, to gods and devils, to heaven and hell, guilty and innocent in unimaginable multitudes. I have blotted out nations from the earth, I have destroyed and laid waste kingdoms. I have done all you demanded of me. I have followed epochs to the grave and stood a while leaning on my dripping sword, until new generations have called to me with young, impatient voices. Seas of people I have scourged bloody and silenced their restless surge for ever. For prophets and saviours I have raised the heretic's pyre. I have sunk human life in night and darkness. I have done everything for you.

Still they call me, and I come. I look over the nations—the earth lies hot and fevered and the scream of sick birds is heard in the air. Then the rutting time of evil has come! Then it's hangman's time!

The sun goes covered in choking clouds and its steamy ball glows clotted and evil. Feared and shunned I walk the earth and reap my harvest. The mark of crime stands burnt in my forehead, I myself am a malefactor, damned to eternity. For your sake.

I am condemned to serve you, and loyal in my service. The blood of centuries is on me.

My soul is full of blood for your sake! My eyes blur and lose their sight, when the howl rises up to me from the tangle of mankind! I rage, striking

everything down—as you want, as you shriek to me to! I am blind with your blood! Blind, locked up in you! You are my prison that I cannot escape from!

When I stand in my hangman's house by the grey window and the meadows outside lie still and silent in the evening with flowers and trees in the great, strange peace—then it seems as if my fate will choke me. I should sink down if it were not that she, here, stood by my side.

He looked at her, at the poor woman who seemed like a beggar, met her glance. . . . I turn away—cannot endure it any more. But she remains there looking out until it grows dusk.

She is a prisoner like me in the house we share, but she can see the earth's loveliness and yet live.

She keeps the hangman's house clean and neat as if it were a human dwelling. She lays a cloth on the table where I eat. I don't know who she is, but she is good to me.

When it's grown dark she strokes me on the forehead and says that the hangman's mark isn't there any more. She is not like anyone else, she can love me.

I have asked men who she is, but no one knows her.

Can anyone tell me why she loves me and looks after our house?

My house is a hangman's house! I will not

have it anything else! Otherwise I am only seized by a still more terrible anguish.

When she has gone to sleep quiet in my arms I get up and lay the quilt over her, get ready—silently, so that she shan't wake. I creep out to my night task—see the sky hang menacing and brooding over the earth. It's good that she didn't wake. It's good that I am alone with what is mine, with that which has to be borne.

Why should I bear everything? Why should everything be laid upon me? All anguish and guilt, all you have done! Why should all your spilt blood cry out to me, so that I never find peace? The curses of criminals and the lament of the innocent—why should my unhappy spirit suffer for everything!

The condemned lay the burden of their fate upon me—it wearies me to listen to them while they wait for their miserable death, and yet their words stay with me. Voices from thousands of years ago cry in me, voices that no one remembers, without life, but living their life in me. The smell of blood that follows you fills me with loathing and weighs me down with ineffaceable guilt.

I have to bear your fate, I have to go your way without tiring, while you have long ago found rest from your deeds in the grave.

Who digs a grave deep enough to cover *me*—to give *me* rest! Who lifts the weight of the curse from my shoulders and brings *me* the peace of death!

No one! For no one is able to bear what I bear.

At the time when there was still a god I once set off to lay my case before him. But what answer had he to give!

I remember it was because I had sat and kept watch by a man who said he was your saviour. He wanted to save you by suffering and dying for you. He wanted to lift my burden from me.

I didn't understand what he meant, for I could see he was a weakling who hadn't even an ordinary man's strength, and I had to smile at him. He called himself the Messiah and had preached peace on earth and been condemned for it.

Even as a child he had realized that he was to suffer and die for mankind. He spoke a lot about his childhood, as they always do, about a land that he called Galilee, it was so wonderful there—they always say that. There were lilies everywhere on the hills in spring, and when he had stood among them and looked round him over the shining earth he had realized that he was the son of God. He was a poor fool. I soon realized that when he'd been talking for a bit. And when he'd looked at them it became clear to him what it was he had to preach, to mankind, what message he should bring them, that it must be: peace on earth. I asked him why he should have to die if they were to find peace, but he answered that it was so, it was a secret covenant. So his father had told him, and by that he meant

God himself. He still had a confident faith like a good child.

But when the time approached he began to be disturbed and to tremble like everyone else and didn't seem so certain about everything any longer. I said nothing and he sat there in anguish by himself and seemed at times to be looking far away. It was as if he needed to see the land of his childhood again and the lilies around him on the earth.

His anguish grew worse and worse. He went down on his knees and began to pray in whispers. My soul is sorrowful unto death. O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. I had to drag him away when the time came.

He hardly had strength to carry the cross, and bowed down and staggered under it, it seemed too pitiable and I went and carried it for him a bit. It was I who did that—not one of the others. It wasn't heavy compared to what I'm used to carrying for mankind.

When I had laid him on it I asked his pardon, as the custom is, before I began the nailing. I don't know, but I felt sorry to take his life. Then he looked at me with his good, anxious eyes which weren't a criminal's, but only those of a poor, wretched man.

I forgive you, brother, he said, in his low voice. And someone near by declared that the hangman's mark disappeared from my forehead while he was saying it, though I don't believe that.

I am sick of my work! I said.

Haven't I done it long enough? Can't you release me from it now?

But he only gazed out into space, motionless, and as if turned to stone.

Listen! I've had enough of my hangman's office. I can't stand any more of it! I can't live amongst blood and horrors, amongst all that you allow to happen. And what sense is there in it, tell me that? I have served faithfully and done all that I could, now I can do no more. I haven't the strength for this any longer. There's been enough of it now! Understand that!

But he didn't see me. His globed eyes stared out desolate and empty into space, as if into a desert. I was filled with terror and an unbearable despair.

To-day I have crucified your own son! I shouted at him, wild and furious. But not a feature changed in his hard, insensitive face. It seemed carved out of stone.

I stood there in the silence and coldness and felt the icy wind of eternity going through me. There was nothing to be done. No one to speak to. Nothing. I had to take up my axe again and go back the way I came.

I realized that he wasn't his son. He belonged to mankind and there was nothing remarkable in their having treated him as they do treat their own. It was only one of themselves they had crucified,

as usual. I made my way back, cold, and feeling angry and indignant.

He was gone like all the others and had found peace already. But I, unhappy spirit, I was driven on as before, and for ever. I had just to go back to the earth to find the way of sorrows again. No one helped me.

No. He was no saviour. How could he be fit for that? He had hands like a half-grown youth, it was pitiable knocking in the nails and trying to get them in between the spindly bones. I wondered whether they'd be strong enough to hang by. How could anyone like that save mankind?

When I pierced his side to see whether we could soon take him down he was dead already, long before they usually are.

What could a poor wretch like that do? How should he be able to help *you*! And lift my burden from me! What a Christ for mankind! I realized why it must be me who served you—why you cry for *me*!

I am your Christ, with the hangman's mark on my forehead! Sent down here to you!

For strife on earth and ill-will towards men!

You have turned your god to stone. He's long been dead now. But I, your Christ, I live! I, his tremendous thought, his son, whom he begot and bore by you while he was still mighty and living and knew what he wanted, knew how he wanted this! Now he is crumbling on his throne like a leper and

his dust is spread over the wastes of heaven by the desolate wind of eternity. But I, Christ, I live! That ye might live! I go my way of slaughter through the world and every day I save you in blood. And you crucify *me*.

I long to be offered up—in the way that my poor, helpless brother did. To be nailed to my cross and give up the ghost in the great, merciful darkness. But that time I know will never come. I must go on and on with my task as long as you endure. My cross will never be raised. And when at last I've finished my work and there's nothing more left here for me to do, I shall still be driven like a restless spirit through the night of the spaces, in my father's tomb—pursued by my torments, by my anguish at what I have done for you.

And yet I long for it. That it shall come to an end, so that I need heap no more guilt upon me.

I long for that time when you will be blotted out from the earth and my arm at last can sink. Hoarse voices will cry to me no more. I stand alone and gaze around me, knowing that all is now fulfilled.

And I go out into the eternal darkness, leaving behind me my bloody axe thrown aside on the desolate earth, in memory of the race that lived here!

He stared out over them with hard and flaming eyes. Then with a jerk he pushed aside the table and went fiercely to the door.

He grasped it—but the woman who had been sitting beside him and who looked like a beggar got up and spoke to him in a quiet and clear voice, her face lit up with a secret, aching happiness.

You know that I wait for you! I wait for you there among the birches when you come bowed down and soiled with blood. And you can lay your head in my lap, and I shall love you. I shall kiss your burning forehead and wipe the blood from your hand.

You know that I wait for you.

He looked at her with a quiet, sad smile. Outside the dull beating of the drums could be heard—he stood listening.

Then he gave a pull at his belt and went out into the raw dawn.

A List of Novels

arranged under authors' names, and
chosen from the fiction published by
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BATES, H. E.

THE TWO SISTERS

'Jenny, Jessie and Michael, figures of eternal youth, shown with all their tumultuous passionate emotions, in a beautiful mirror.'

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BATES, RALPH

THE OLIVE FIELD

A long and exciting story of the Spanish Revolution - 1932-3.

BROPHY, JOHN

WATERFRONT

Liverpool life, work in a big department store, the skeleton in a respectable family cupboard.

THE WORLD WENT MAD

A cross-section of English life during the Great War; a living sequence of brief cinematographic scenes.

I LET HIM GO

A sensitive young man is confronted, in exceptional circumstances with his wife's murderer. What will be his emotions? What action will he take?

CALDER-MARSHALL, ARTHUR

TWO OF A KIND

Two love-affairs, a father's and a daughter's; twenty-five years apart in time, but of equal significance.

HEMINGWAY, ERNEST

FIESTA

A relentless picture of the post-war American expatriates in Montparnasse. (U.S.A. Title. *The Sun also Rises*.)

A FAREWELL TO ARMS

Americans on the Italian front, and the poignancy of a personal drama staged against the war background.

TORRENTS OF SPRING

A brilliant pastiche of certain modern novels, written with the author's richest gusto.

HOPKINS, STANLEY

THE LADIES

The story of Captain Flood and his five daughters; their lives and tragedies in a small Southern town in America.

SIXTH OF JUNE

The lives and thoughts of a Virginian family, brought together by the 'Sixth of June' holiday.

HURST, FANNIE

LUMMOX

The life-story of Bertha, maid-of-all-work.

A PRESIDENT IS BORN

The early life of a man destined to be President of the United States.

FIVE AND TEN

The 'thirteenth richest man in the world', and the strange characters surrounding him.

BACK STREET

The life of a woman who lives in the 'back street' of a rich protector's life.

ANITRA'S DANCE

The story of Bruno, genius and composer, and of his bohemian household in New York.

LEWIS, SINCLAIR

MARTIN ARROWSMITH

The fight of a doctor against shams and hypocrisies in medical science.

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